

MRS. BRADLEY SERIES

# ADDERS *on the* HEATH



# GLADYS MITCHELL

# ADDERS ON THE HEATH

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# ADDERS ON THE HEATH

GLADYS MITCHELL

 THOMAS & MERCER

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*To TESSA NIVEN with love*

*Better if the country be real, and he has walked every foot of it and knows every milestone. As he studies it, relations will appear that he had not thought upon; he will discover obvious, though unexpected, short cuts and footprints for his messengers; and even when a map is not all the plot, it will be found to be a mine of suggestion.*

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

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# Prelude

*I hope they kill nothing in the woods but foxes.*

*The Verney Letters, 1738*

Members of the Scylla and District Social and Athletic Club are rarely seen in action at the White City. Still less often, if at all, do they represent the A.A.A. against Oxford or Cambridge. They are present at the Olympics, (provided that they can afford to be present), as spectators, not as competitors.

Yet the club is a keen one, has a treasurer apt at collecting subscriptions, and is not without its aspirants to county honours, for now and again the county will call a member or two for trials, the club's own time-keeping being unreliable.

One candidate for this honour did not impress the judges, who considered his tactics in the two-mile race rather suspect. As he had won it, both he and his girlfriend were very much annoyed and referred (in broader and less printable terms) to the bias and favouritism of the chief judge. The girlfriend was a club-mate, for the Scylla and District admits women members. It took a very stormy A.G.M. to achieve this, but the treasurer carried the day.

"We're a bit short this year, and you can always bully women into paying the sub," he said. "After all, they need only use the facilities once a week. We can make that a rule."

"They'll be more nuisance than they're worth," said someone, but this was only partly true. The club, in fact, had

shown a certain amount of enlightenment and good sense in admitting women to membership, but this was allied, perhaps, to an equal lack of caution, for the ladies (God bless them!) were apt to be both critical and partisan. In addition, those ladies who joined the Scylla and District proved to be a vociferous, enthusiastic body, sometimes (alas!) divided among themselves, as when Aileen Crumb got a flyer over Doreen Dodds and beat her by three yards in the two-twenty—"Crumb's got the crust of Old Nick, and, of course, the starter was her uncle," ran the ugly comment of the Dodds's supporters)—and there were other incidents which divided the ladies into two camps. Still, taken on the whole, they were as close-knit a body as the Amazons, although following a somewhat different ideology, as they warred only on other women and never attempted to tackle Theseus and his men.

All the same, there had always been one exception to that which, otherwise, was their fixed rule. When lined up for the high hurdles or the short sprint, they were adept at *not quite* beating the gun, and so were the terror of the timid, red-blazered starter.

"Still," said Corinna May to her fellow-hurdler and second string, Dulcie Cobham, "it takes the males to spike each other on the bends, and, personally—and I have it for a fact because he told me so himself—I happen to know that poor old Bert was spiked, yes, and jostled, too, by that pot-bellied so-and-so in the two miles this afternoon. Bert could of won, and he certainly did ought to have done, and, if he had, he'd of stood a good chance of being picked for the county at the White City British Games, Whitsun. It was a damn' shame!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Dulcie, who was a fair-minded girl except where her own boyfriend was concerned. "It's easy enough to jostle and even spike people without really meaning to. I mean, you've got to do the best you can for yourself, haven't you? Anyway, they ought to start the

distance races further back up the straight, and then there wouldn't be that fight for the inside place at the first bend."

"All the same," said Corinna, sticking to her guns, (for she was hoping to go steady with Albert when, at the age of twenty, she retired from the track), "poor old Bert *was* jostled and he *was* spiked, and it was done by that bitchy Lord Haw-Haw that everybody hates and despises. He never does run fair. I don't know why we still have fixtures with that bloody lot, I don't really!"

"Oh, I don't know. They've got some quite good runners," said Dulcie, biting back her opinion of Albert Colnbrook's own shady mannerisms on bends screened by water-jump hedges. "*Quite* good runners," she repeated.

"Oh, *you!*" exclaimed Bert's girlfriend, exasperated, but, so far, unwilling to quarrel, since she was expecting Dulcie to act as pace-maker over the first two hurdles in the inter-club competition. "You'd stick up for Satan if he was a long-distance runner!"

"Well, anyhow, he'd probably burn up the opposition," retorted Dulcie, who had been brought up on the Bible.

Corinna's sentiments (or something remarkably like them) were being expressed in a men's dressing-room some weeks later.

"Bumping and boring are a recognised part of their technique on the track, and one expects this and makes allowances. And, of course, some of those blighters know exactly what to do behind the little hedge at the water-jump. But when it comes to cross-country running and an ugly great lout offers to put a fist in your face because, in jumping a brook just ahead of him (and that, of course, was what he couldn't stand), you happen to throw a bit of soft mud in his eye, well, give me Heton and 'Arrer, or even Ox and Tab. Why, the poisonous bounder actually threatened to murder me!" complained a young man named Richardson.

"What did *you* do?" asked his audience, towelling themselves vigorously and indicating that they were not

particularly stirred by these disclosures.

"Me? Well, I said, "Sorry, old boy. See you later for a drink." You have to play soft with these yobs, and the match was only a friendly. But would he play ball? No."

"So then?" asked someone, in a bored tone.

"He took it upon himself to tell me how I was raised and reared."

"And you?" asked Mr. Bones, still unenthusiastic.

"I slapped him in the kisser and told him I would remember him in my will."

"Meaning you'd twist his head off?" This question came from a dried-and-dressed as he parted his hair.

"Well, actually, he fell in the brook, so I cantered lightly on, but took jolly good care I didn't sit next to him at that rather decent supper they gave us, if you noticed."

"What was his name?"

"A. B. Colnbrook, but I shouldn't think he'd ever been to sea!"

"Albert Basil. My second cousin knows him, in a way. She did a lot of research last year on people's psychological reactions to winning and losing, and A.B.C. was one of her favourite guinea-pigs."

"Good Lord! It's a small world!"

"So the angels probably say from their rather precarious seats in outer space. It *must* look a small world to them."

"Did your second cousin concentrate on studying athletes?" asked a chunky long-jumper, pulling on his sweater.

"Lord, no! Bingo, the dogs, the flat, steeple-chasing, the pools—everything was grist to her mill."

"And what did she do with her notes?" asked a high-hurdler. The audience, almost fully dressed, was alert at last.

"Sent them to some bloke who was doing a book on how to tame hyenas."

"And how *do* you?"

"I haven't read the book. I don't know."

"Did Albert Basil figure as a hyena?"

"So far as I was concerned, he figured as a bloody great gorilla."

"Oh, he isn't as chesty as all that!" objected a shot-putt man from a corner of the dressing-room.

*"Beer, beer, beer, beer, beer, said the privates!"* carolled and quoted an anxious voice; and the dressing-room emptied rapidly.



# CHAPTER ONE

## Tent on the Common

*Camping without a permit is an offence against  
the New Forest Bye-laws.*

*Forestry Commission Guide to the New Forest*  
Her Majesty's Stationery Office

Richardson was in another hostelry some few weeks later. The handsomely-appointed bar—drinks (praise be!) at pub prices—occupied the segment of a circle at the south-west angle of the lounge. The furniture in the remainder of the large, light room was pleasant and, considering its *raison d'être*, supremely functional. At each polished table there were two small, hard-seated, red-leather, hip-fitting armchairs and two deep and comfortable *fauteuils* loose-covered in a gaily-patterned chintz which pictured riders, horses, and hounds.

There were more horses and hounds on the lampshades and on the long curtains. The fire-irons depended from a stand in the shape of an outsize horseshoe and on the walls four early-nineteenth-century prints demonstrated various stages in a fox hunt.

Additions to the furniture included a deep, wide settee upholstered to match the armchairs, and two high-backed wooden settles whose Spartan discomfort was only partially alleviated by the addition of the mattress-like cushions which covered their seats. A bright fire burned in a modern

brick-built fireplace and the arch of this fireplace was decorated with some highly-polished and unusual horse-brasses.

Richardson—Tom to his very few friends—was drinking a pint of bitter and looking forward to his lunch. He had travelled from London that morning by train, had hiked, pack on back, from the station to the common, had erected his tent, and then had come back to the hotel for his meal. Deliberately he had left his car with a friend who was going to join him later. His lonely, very short holiday was to be spent on foot until the friend arrived, and then would stretch itself out to a fortnight or more.

Lunch was at one o'clock. He was given a table which faced the garden. The time was the Thursday of the third week in September, but the only tree which showed even the first touch of autumn was a huge horsechestnut whose leaves here and there glowed bronze against the green.

The lawn, broken only by a couple of circular flowerbeds and some bordering trees, appeared to stretch into infinity, for, either by good fortune or careful landscaping, the end of it could not be seen from the dining-room windows because it took a turn to the right by some tall Scots pines, a cypress, and a circle of rhododendron bushes.

The flower garden, rich in many varieties of dahlias, Michaelmas daisies, late carnations, and some roses, was also out of sight of the dining-room—at any rate from where Richardson sat—so, his satisfying lunch over, he took a turn in the garden before he left for his encampment on the common. He discovered that the lawn he had seen from his seat at table was bounded by a short wattle fence at the end of a hedge of yew. A magnificent and friendly collie joined him in his perambulations and in company with the dog he traversed the lawn, picked up a couple of fir cones from beneath the dark trees which bordered the gravel walk, came back across the lawn past the great horsechestnut tree, idly picked up a burr in whose prickly

sheath the hard nut gleamed and shone, turned into the flower garden, glanced at the geraniums and tomato plants in the greenhouse, and wondered whether the stables still contained horses. Then he went into the house and drank coffee, paid his bill, and made his way back to camp.

The road went very slightly uphill and was bordered by oak, thorn, hazel, birch, and holly. On his right these screened a wide stretch of open land (known locally as a lawn), on which were cattle and Forest ponies. To his left the undergrowth, trees, and brambles grew as thickly as in the woods, but here and there a gravel path led to a fair-sized house. Civilisation thus encroached upon the wild, but, a little farther on, past a fenced enclosure whose use he did not, at that time, understand, came a vast expanse of open commonland around which the distant woods made a bluish, saucer-like rim.

Richardson struck off to the right, and, skirting a rough road with a surface of loose gravel, he followed a clear track which ran for a few hundred yards alongside the road and then left it for a well-defined causeway. This crossed a newly-planted area of young pine-trees and was bordered by shallow ditches along whose edges the bell-heather and the ling were still in flower.

The causeway reached a woodland path and then a clear brown stream. There was a rustic bridge with a handrail and on the opposite side a narrow track ran roughly east and west along the river. Richardson turned to the right to skirt the wire-fence boundary of an enclosure and swung left with the path at the end of this fencing to find himself upon a veritable waste of heath across which stretched a broad, grassy ride. This crossed a gravelled road which led, on the left, to a house and on the right to a fairly wide bridge.

Richardson crossed the road and followed the broad green ride until, at a bend in the river, he came to the spot on which he had set up his tent. The tent was a sordid little

affair, not more than three feet wide and only high enough to allow the occupant to choose whether to lie flat, kneel, crouch, or sit. It sufficed for his needs, however, and had the supreme advantages of being small to pack and light to carry. The rest of his paraphernalia was under a waterproof sheet a yard from the tent-flap and was as meagre as long experience of lone camping could possibly make it. He was, like the immortal Merkland of *John MacNab*, not dressy. His heavier luggage he proposed to leave at the station until he booked in at the hotel.

Although it was almost the end of the third week in September, an Indian summer seemed likely. Richardson had not taken the weather into his calculations in fixing his holiday, but merely the fact that, so late in the season, he would be likely to get the camping site to himself. Still, it was pleasant to see the sunshine and feel its grateful if unseasonable warmth. He was not—and would not so have described himself—a naturalist, but he liked to have some definite interest or occupation during a lonely holiday and had decided, this year, to observe and, if possible, photograph, the fauna of the forest. He hoped for deer, badgers, foxes, hares, the irrepressible rabbit, and even the otter. If he neither spotted nor photographed any of them, he would still be of Stevenson's opinion that to travel hopefully is better than to arrive. He was a sinuously fit young man and could move like a cat. He possessed, also, an almost cat-like capacity for being able to see in the dark.

He spent the afternoon in prospecting for likely badger setts and foxes' holes and, finding himself alone in the wide waste over which a visitor could be distinguished a long way off, he discovered a spot along the water at which, under the nearside bank, where the river turned a sharpish bend, there was a natural bathing-place four or five feet deep. It was not big enough for swimming, but proved to be an excellent hole for a cold and refreshing dip. All afternoon he did not see a soul, but, on taking a brisk walk after his rough

toweling, he heard, in the woods at the far side of the heath, the sound of foresters felling a mighty tree.

He returned to the hotel for tea. He had decided that there was no point in spending time shopping in the village, and there was no farm near enough to make it worth the trouble of carrying milk, water and eggs back to his camp. Richardson, besides, was a good trencherman but an indifferent cook. Neither did he want to spend time collecting dead wood for a fire, although the Forest by-laws allowed for this. He had, too, (after hearing of the devastating experience of a friend), a dread of starting a conflagration. His sleeping-bag of wool and camel-hair provided sufficient warmth at night, and comfort was assured by the inflatable mattress on which, over a groundsheet, it rested. He thought that he would be perfectly happy until his friend arrived on the Saturday.

He enjoyed his tea and lingered over it. When he took the road again it was ten minutes to five. He passed two girls on horseback, and several cars and a lorry either passed or overtook him; otherwise the world, so far as he was concerned, was empty of human beings. He reached camp and decided to continue to follow the course of the river. It was not possible to keep close to the bank because of bushes, thick and dense in places, and some patches of marshy ground, but he met the water again at frequent intervals and came, at last, to the borders of a wood.

Here all trace of a path was lost. He continued to follow the stream until impenetrable thickets and a good deal of mud made progress less than tolerable. He struck back, through the trees—pine, oak, and beech—and regained the open heath. A fair, broad trackway, recently used by wheeled vehicles, led him between gorse and bramble towards his tent.

He was within a quarter of a mile of his camp when he spotted the runners. There were two of them jogging along across the heath, apparently out for a training spin, for they

were obviously in no hurry. In fact, as he watched, they slowed up and then stopped. Rather to his surprise, the shorter of them put field-glasses to his eyes and, after scanning the countryside for a full three minutes, he handed the glasses to his companion.

The men were a couple of hundred yards away and it was impossible to gain an impression of anything more than their height and general build, yet something about the taller man struck a chord in Richardson's memory. Tantalisingly, however, he could not recall the circumstances under which he must have met the man. As the fellow was in running kit, however, he assumed that he must be a member of some club with which his own had been associated.

He walked on and then glanced sideways and a little behind him. The taller man was handing back the glasses. They were an odd sort of burden to carry on a cross-country run, Richardson thought. The only rational explanation seemed to be that the two men were to be the hares in a hare-and-hounds chase and were plotting their route. What they had appeared to be watching, however, was a group of forest ponies which had come into view against the dark trees of a fir wood, a Forestry plantation away over to Richardson's right.

He made his way back to camp and when he got there he spread his *anorak* on the ground, sat down on it, and lit a pipe. He smoked very little, for he was always in reasonably good training, but a pipe helped contemplation and seemed to fit in with the quiet of the approaching evening.

When he had finished the pipe and knocked it out on to some mud at the edge of the stream, he put everything ready for the night and went off to have dinner at the hotel. He had not expected to see the two runners again, but they must have taken a long cast round when they reached the fencing of the fir wood, for they had come out upon the common. They were near enough now for him to see the

taller man more clearly. This time he recognised him. He was the A. B. Colnbrook of the cross-country inter-club incident and the chief actor in another encounter which Richardson still thought of with distaste.

He had no desire to meet the fellow again, and, fortunately, there was no chance of this, for, even as he recognised Colnbrook, the two runners, who had again been using their field-glasses although the light was failing fast, picked up their feet, and cantered off on the path which Richardson himself had just left.

On the following morning, having breakfasted at the hotel, he walked into the village for letters. There was a postcard from the friend who had planned to join him.

"Can't manage this week-end. Have to come on Monday at about half-past eleven," was the gist of the information it contained. Richardson was not at all sorry. He was enjoying his solitude and to have the time of it extended for two or three days did not trouble him, but rather the reverse. He thrust the postcard into his jacket pocket, bought cigarettes, sweets, and fruit in the village, stopped a moment at the water-splash to watch a foal which had found some herbage on the bank there, crossed by the footbridge, and tramped along the winding road to the hotel. He stayed for lunch and then went for a walk over the common. He photographed a mare and her foal, saw a hare but was not able to get a picture, and took a long cast round which he hoped would bring him back on to the heath.

He covered about eleven miles, using the Ordnance map and a pocket compass, and reached camp too late, he noted ruefully, to go back and get tea at the hotel. He took a plunge in his water-hole, the second that day, and decided to get to the hotel by about seven, have a drink before dinner and then, after dinner, try his luck with flashlight at the entrance to a badgers' sett which a forester he met had pointed out to him.

The sett was about a mile and a half from his camp, in a bank in the middle of the woods. By the time he reached his tent, after having dined at the hotel, the September evening was chilly. He added a thick sweater to his shirt and pullover, then, camera and bulb in hand, he set off for his objective. He carried, besides, a small electric torch, for the going was made treacherous at times by ant-hills and low-growing gorse and the night was moonless and dark.

He took up his position and waited for the better part of two hours. He became cramped and chilly, but there was no sign of brock. There were the usual whisperings and movements of a forest at night, and the brown owls were calling, but, from Richardson's point of view, his vigil was fruitless. He returned to camp, took off his shoes and his jacket, and crawled into his tent. His sleeping-bag was warmly lined and the rubber mattress was gratefully springy. In no time at all he was asleep.

Bird-song woke him early. Dawn was at hand and the half-light was eerie. He emerged from his sleeping-bag with care and crawled out of the tent. The trees in the distant wood, where he had watched for the badgers, were no more than a bluish-black blur and when (almost suddenly, it seemed) the bird-song ceased, he could hear the river which, in full daylight, had seemed soundless, rippling softly in song over stones.

The light broadened fast, as, pulling a towel from his pack, he went off to his water-hole for a dip. The stream was agonisingly cold and, when he was dry and had dressed, he went for a run. Breakfast at the hotel was not served before eight, so he trotted towards the gravelled road which led one way to the house he had seen and the other way to the wide wooden bridge. Twenty yards or so beyond the bridge, he still followed the road, where it bent to the left, and trotted on.

The surface was loose and very rough, but soon he realised that by leaving its verge and making passage



through a gap in the wayside gorse, he could run parallel to the road on the adjacent common. He crossed over and soon his shoes were sodden with dew.

The road itself led into magnificent woods. He left the common and followed the stony track over a rough plank bridge, and then across another, beneath which the main stream ran. He paused on this second bridge and leaned on the parapet. The water below the left-hand side of the bridge ran deep and widened out into a sizeable pool. Richardson marked the pool as a possible swimming place, and then walked on. The woodland was open, and displayed, in all their grey-boled grandeur, magnificent beeches and several giant oaks. There also were holly trees whose girth gave a clue to their antiquity, and there were some ancient thorn trees on which the berries were bright in their autumn scarlet. Blackberries were ripe, or ripening, and every wild rose bush had its smooth, red, ovular fruits.

Richardson followed the path along ruts made by foresters' carts and the indentations of the caterpillar wheels of tractors. He skirted muddy pools which rarely dried up all the year, and, pursuing his way, disturbed the sudden birds and the darting grey squirrels. At last he came to the fringe of the wood and to such a watery quagmire that his progress that way was halted. Beyond him, and on either side of the path, was a heather-covered, bracken-fronded common with never a path or road. He looked at his watch. It was more than time to turn back if he wanted breakfast.

He retraced his steps—no hardship in this undiscovered country. The wood, except for landmarks in the form of one or two fine beeches which he had noted on his outward journey, looked completely different when traversed in the opposite direction. He regained the bridges and the road, and then took a narrow, built-up path (which a formidable notice prohibited equestrians from using) and, by brisk walking, came, as he had anticipated, on to the so-called

lawn—really a part of the common—opposite the hotel. He crossed a couple of plank bridges over small and sluggish streams, and struck out across the grass. He arrived rather muddy, but in great spirits and extremely hungry for his breakfast, at just after nine o'clock.

The defection of Denis, who was now not due to arrive until Monday morning, had made him consider how best he might employ the Saturday and the Sunday. He thought that, on these days, the quiet walks and excursions which he had so much enjoyed on the Thursday and Friday might be made less solitary by the invasion of week-end parties or by the local people who had Saturday and Sunday free. By the time breakfast was over he had made up his mind what to do. He would take a train to the second station down the line and from there follow his nose. There was a manor house marked on the map. He thought he might take a look at it.

He looked up a train in the A.B.C. lent to him at the hotel, and set off, inconspicuously dressed in grey worsted trousers and a green-mixture tweed jacket, for the station. The train came in to time, but nobody, later on, came forward to declare that he had boarded it, and at the station where he alighted there was not a ticket-collector or a porter to be seen. Not knowing what to do with his ticket, and unwilling to hang about, he left it on the ledge of the ticket office and walked out into the sunshine.

He had sheets 179 and 180 of the one-inch Ordnance Survey, but the roads proved to be adequately signposted and a walk of about three miles brought him to crossroads in the middle of a large, flourishing, remarkably uninteresting village. At this point the map helped him, and he tramped along a country road, past fields, until he came to the manor house. Regrettably, but in accordance, he supposed, with modern usage, the mansion had been turned into flats. Cars stood about in what had been the entrance to the stables,

and in the forecourt of the once pleasant old country house were a couple of large caravans.

There was nothing for it but to tramp onwards towards lunch and the coast. He crossed the main Lymington road, dropped southwards and then, still following the signposts and helped again by the map, he took a secondary road south-east until he came to cliffs and the sea. There was a solitary hotel on the cliff-top. He went in, drank beer, and had lunch.

After lunch he strolled for an hour along the cliff-top; later he descended a primitive wooden stairway to the beach. He changed, behind a chunk of fallen cliff, into the swimming trunks he had brought, stayed in the smooth sea for twenty minutes or so, dried himself and dressed and, forswearing tea for once, caught the bus into Lymington. Here he purchased two pairs of woolen socks and, at another shop (where, afterwards, they remembered him), he bought a pair of gumboots.

After that he waited for and boarded another bus which took him back to the station from which he had set out. Half an hour later he was at dinner in the hotel. He felt relaxed but not tired, treated himself to a half-bottle of claret, and was in no hurry to get back to camp. He had coffee and a liqueur, smoked a couple of cigarettes and finally left at a quarter to nine.

The night was clear and fine and the *moon* was up, but the temperature had dropped considerably with the coming on of the dark, so Richardson stepped out briskly, and, in spite of having to carry the heavy gumboots as well as his bathing trunks and towel, took ten minutes' less time than usual. His tent glimmered faintly ahead. The time was approximately twenty-five minutes to ten.

He switched on his torch, tossed the gumboots on the ground beside the waterproof pack which contained most of his belongings, unstrapped the knapsack from his shoulders, and pulled out the damp trunks and towel. Then he turned

the torchlight on to the flap of the tent to light up the narrow entrance.

"Hello!" he thought. "I've had a visitor. Wonder whether anything's missing? Have to wait until morning. Can't check everything now. Lucky I didn't leave any spare cash about. Messy blighter, whoever he was!"

The marks of muddy fingers were visible on the tent-flap. Richardson had studied them for a minute or so before another thought came to him. The visitor, finding the tent unoccupied, might have decided that it would shelter him for the night. In this case, he most probably would be a tramp.

Richardson had encountered tramps before. As a class he did not care for them. He switched off his torch, lay with his ear against the tent flap and listened. The first thing that struck him was that there was no sound of breathing, or of anything else, coming from the interior of the tent. The second point to impinge upon his conscious mind was that the dew on the heath was heavy and that his feet were extremely wet.

With these considerations in mind, he switched on the torch again, drew aside the tent-flap, and crawled in. His bed was occupied. On top of groundsheet, rubber mattress and sleeping-bag lay a man. There had been no sound of breathing because the man was dead.

It did not take Richardson long to ascertain this. At first, on hands and knees, he played his torch over the features and clothing of the corpse. Then he backed out again while he considered how best to tackle the problem which confronted him.

It was not an easy thing to do, but he forced himself to enter the tent again. He felt the man's hands and stared, in the torchlight, at the rigid, slug-white face. He groped inside the man's shirt for his heartbeats, but there were none. Then, with a sense of repugnance, but also from a sense of duty, he put his mouth against the mouth of the corpse and

breathed deeply, in and out, against the clenched teeth and parted lips.

All was in vain. At last, in an effort of resuscitation which was not far removed from an inexperienced person's panic in the face of unexpected, unexplained death, he thumped the corpse over the heart with a pounding fist and shouted, "Why the devil, Colnbrook, did you have to die on *me*?"

# CHAPTER TWO

## Hounds of the Law

*...and some of the young hounds paid him  
rather more attention than he appreciated; so  
he tried to keep them off with his umbrella...*

*Sporting Recollections of a Younger Son*  
Claude Luttrell

After the first shock of dismay and—it must be admitted—a sort of horrified annoyance, it occurred to Richardson that the house whose estate he had circumnavigated in the approach to his camping site was probably on the telephone. It would need to be, he argued, as it was so far from the shops and the village.

Thither, therefore, he made his way by torchlight, intending to request the loan of the instrument for the purpose of calling the police. These, he supposed, would contact a doctor, although he realised that there was little, if anything, that a doctor could do except specify the cause of death and arrange for Colnbrook's body to be removed.

At the house, however, he met with an immediate check. An obviously nervous maidservant, her hair in curlers, answered the door and stood there staring at him. He gave no reason, beyond a statement that the call was urgent, for asking to use the telephone, and was met, not unreasonably, by a flat, although apologetic, refusal.

"Nobody aren't home except me and Cook and Shirl, and I dursent let anybody in with the master and missus away," the quavering domestic announced.

Richardson, although a trifle nonplussed, tried again.

"I'm not trying to steal anything. It's just that the call is very important indeed and it would take me some time to get to another telephone. Don't you think...?" he enquired.

The maid cut the conversation short by slamming the door, and he heard the heavy bolts, which had been withdrawn in answer to his knock, thrust home again. There was nothing for it but to make for the hotel and trust that there was a night porter on duty.

It turned out that the hotel did not employ a night porter, but that the front door was kept open until midnight to accommodate those guests who had motored into Bournemouth to see one of the shows. He effected an entrance easily enough, therefore, and found the day porter, with whom he was already acquainted, about to lock up and retire for the night.

"Barney," he said, "I want to use the phone."

"Help yourself, Mr. Richardson." The porter took in the white face and the shaking hands. "Anything I can do?"

"Yes. Look up the police for me, will you? Some gosh-awful bloke has gone and died on me."

"Not the friend you were expecting, Mr. Richardson?"

"Oh, no, thank God. Somebody who decided to crawl into my tent and peg out there. I suppose he felt bad, poor devil, but I wish to hell he hadn't picked on *me*! Now there'll be no end of a hoo-ha, I suppose, and I'll be questioned and goodness knows what!"

"Sit you down on the settee, sir. You look as if you'd had a nasty shock. It'll be the Hurstington police as will be best. Some of the sub-stations aren't manned the whole of the time. I'll need to look in the book to put you through."

He disappeared, but the telephone kiosk used by the guests was only a step or two along the passage and

Richardson could hear the porter's end of the call.

"Hurstington police station? New Forest Hunt Hotel here. Gent has something to report...Yes, hold the line, please." He returned to Richardson. "O.K. You're through, sir." He retired and Richardson went to the telephone. He told his tale, but withheld the fact that he knew the dead man. There would be time for the details later.

"Stay where you are, sir, and we'll be right over," said the Superintendent.

Tom returned to the settee in the entrance hall. Barney came back with a pot of black coffee and a basin of sugar.

"Here, sir," he said. "Have a go at this. You need it, Sorry I can't stiffen it up a bit for you, but the bar's been locked up this last hour."

The police arrived half an hour later and took Richardson in their car along the secondary road from the hotel and then by way of the crunching gravel trackway on to the common. The causeway, which led across the plantation of baby firs to the deciduous wood and the bridge, was not nearly wide enough to take a car, so the driver continued to follow the gravel trackway and crossed the wide bridge. Here he parked the car on the grass and remained in charge of it while the Superintendent and a detective-sergeant accompanied Richardson to his camp.

Richardson, on whom his experience of finding the dead man had acted like something in a horrible dream, had the feeling, suddenly, that he had brought the police on a wild-goose chase and that when they pulled back the tent-flap there would be nothing there but his bedding and effects. This, however, was not the case. The sergeant took charge of him, while the Superintendent, armed with a powerful torch, ducked into the mean little shelter.

He soon came out again.

"Go and get Sansom," he said to his sergeant. "I'll wait here with Mr. Richardson until you come back. Sansom will



have to stay on guard here. There's nothing we can do until the morning. Can't take any useful photographs in this."

The sergeant went off and the Superintendent addressed Richardson. He had switched off his torch and they talked in the dark.

"Been here long, sir?"

"Since Thursday, about eleven in the morning."

"Know the neighbourhood?"

"From studying the Ordnance maps." (It was part of the truth.)

"Know the deceased?"

"Never set eyes on him in my life before." He told this lie instinctively and regretted it too late.

"Just so, sir. I'll have to take a full statement from you in the morning, but, if I can get one or two facts quite clear for the moment, it may help me."

"To make sure I don't spend the night cooking up a story?" Richardson felt panic-stricken again.

"Now, now, sir! You could have only one reason for doing that, you know."

Richardson, in his fright, asked disingenuously, "Good Lord! You don't think the chap was *murdered*?"

"That is a matter for the doctor, sir. Now, if you'd just give me an account of your movements yesterday and today..."

Richardson, feeling slightly sick, gave the Superintendent a résumé of what he had done and where he had been. It sounded inadequate, he thought.

"So, you see, I had a bit of a shock when I clocked in here at about half-past nine or just after, to find that I'd got a visitor. I was sure he was dead, but I did my best for him," he said in conclusion.

"Yes, sir?"

"Then I went to that house over there—there were lights on then, but they're out now—to telephone, you know."

"Yes?"

"But there was nobody there who was prepared to authorise me to use the phone—only the maids and they wouldn't let me in. I don't blame them, of course, only it meant that I had to get back to the hotel. I telephoned you from there as soon as I could."

"Very good sir. Well, as soon as the constable gets here, I'll run you back. I suppose they can give you a bed?"

"I've no idea, but I certainly can't sleep here."

"Definitely not, sir." Someone holding a torch approached them. "Ah, here comes Sansom." He gave the constable some directions. "Now, then, sir, I expect you can do with some sleep. It's a bit late for you to fix up at the hotel, now I come to think of it, so, if you'll accept another arrangement, there's a spare room at my house and we'll drive back there now and soon get you settled for the night."

"Well, thanks..." said Richardson uncertainly. "It will mean I'll be on the spot for questioning in the morning, I suppose. Still, it's very good of you."

"Think nothing of it, sir. As for questioning, there's nothing to worry about there. It's just routine, you know. The circumstances are unusual, you see, and we'll need to get a clear picture. That's all there is to it, you'll find. Oh, there *is* just one thing more, sir. Now I don't want you to get any wrong ideas about this, thinking I don't believe your account of the matter and so forth, but I expect my torch is a good bit more powerful than your own—you did say you saw the dead man by the light of your torch, sir?"

"Yes, but it gives a pretty strong light, you know, and the battery's new."

"Quite so, sir. Well, now, if you don't mind just borrowing my torch while I stand by."

"What on earth for?" Richardson realised that, unintentionally, his voice was high-pitched and his tone nervous.

“Well, sir, the circumstances being, as I say and as you will admit, unusual, I would appreciate it if you would just take another look at the body to make certain you don’t know who it is.”

Richardson’s heart failed him. The Superintendent suspected something! There was nothing for it, however, but to comply with his request. He accepted the loan of the powerful torch and unwillingly crawled into the tent. It was a complete and almost devastating shock to see that the body was no longer that of Colnbrook. What lay there was the corpse of a man considerably shorter than Colnbrook. It must be that of the other runner, although both men had changed their clothes since he had seen them last. Colnbrook had had on a rather aggressive check suit. This man had on a tweed jacket and flannel trousers.

Feeling sick, Richardson backed out of the tent and handed the torch to the Superintendent.

“I don’t know him,” he said. This, at least, was true. “But, well, it doesn’t look to me like the same man,” he added, desperately anxious to cover up his first lie.

“Come, come, sir. You had a shock, I daresay, when you first saw the body. Not surprising, that. You can’t identify him, then?”

“He’s pretty persistent,” thought Richardson. Aloud he said, “No, I certainly can’t. What can have induced him to plant himself on me?”

“That we must find out, sir—that is, if he *did* plant himself on you.”

“What do you mean by that?” (Murder, of course! They *must* believe the man had been murdered! And what about Colnbrook? Could he have been suffering from hallucinations when he thought that the first man was Colnbrook?)

“We have to keep open minds, sir, when bodies are found in unexpected places under what might prove to be suspicious circumstances. That’s all, sir,” said the

Superintendent, soothingly. "And now, come along, sir. Hop in the back and we'll soon find you a kip-down for the night. Best forget about this until the morning."

"Shall I—do I have to attend an inquest or anything?"

"I'm afraid so, sir, but there's plenty of time for that. You'll only need to depose that you found the body. Then we'll have to get it identified, as you cannot help us there, and the rest is up to the medical officer. There's really nothing to worry about."

"Sez you!" thought Richardson grimly.

The police car ground itself over the rough gravel until it reached the road which led to the hotel. It passed the hotel and turned through a shallow water-splash and up the main street of the sleeping village. At the top it turned to the right at the level crossing, and, some time later, after a smooth rush on an empty main road, it was driven in at the double gates of a large, redbrick, new-looking police station lighted fearsomely by the headlamps. At the back of this solid block was the Superintendent's private house and here the car drew up. Richardson was taken into the dining-room and given whisky and soda and a plate of biscuits and cheese. The Superintendent made no reference to the dead man in the tent, but drank whisky with his guest and then smoked placidly while Richardson, who found himself almost startlingly hungry, played havoc with the food provided.

The young man had brought nothing with him from his camp, but, when he was shown up to the spare room which had been promised him, he found pyjamas laid out on the small single bed and the Superintendent, indicating these, observed that they might be a bit on the large side but would be better than nothing. He then showed him the bathroom and an electric razor and wished him good night, adding that breakfast would be served at half-past seven. Richardson was aware, ten minutes later, that a car drove off, but after that he slept until a thumping on the door

caused him to accept the fact, at first incredulously, that it was morning and time to get up.

The Superintendent's wife served breakfast. It was a misty morning, but this, she said, would soon clear. The Superintendent himself did not appear and Richardson, who had expected to be grilled as soon as breakfast was over, was not certain whether to be thankful or apprehensive when the wife observed that Jim would find it cold up there on the common.

After breakfast she settled her guest in an armchair by an electric fire and gave him the morning paper. He flicked over the pages to find out whether there was any reference to the dead man in the tent, but soon realised that that piece of news would not yet be public property.

At just after ten the Superintendent returned and Richardson was invited to step over to his office. Although the headlights and the lamp over the door had given him an impression of size, he was surprised to see, in daylight, just how large and uncompromising a building the redbrick police station was.

The Superintendent's office, however, was reassuringly like all other offices. There was an enormous desk with a swivel chair and two telephones, filing cabinets against the walls and an armchair for the visitor. There was a box of cigarettes on the desk and Richardson accepted a cigarette when it was offered and prepared to sell his life dearly.

"Just a point or two, sir," said the Superintendent, with a geniality which made Richardson's blood run cold. "First of all, what made you jump to the idea that the man was dead when you found him?"

Of all the questions which Richardson had half-anticipated, this was the biggest surprise and he was extremely hard put to it for an answer. He stared at the desk and then said,

"I don't really know, except that he didn't seem to be breathing. What I can't make out is how a dying man would

have known that my tent was there—that's one thing—and then, well, the lights from that house, you know. You'd have thought that if he felt bad he'd have made for them in the hope that they would phone a doctor or something. So I'm beginning to conclude that he might have been dumped on me, as I had a feeling you yourself thought last night. I didn't think all this out at the time. It's what I've been thinking since; so I don't suppose I've answered your question." (What did all this sound like, he wondered, and what had happened to *Colnbrook's* body?)

"Near enough, sir, near enough. Those ideas were in your subconscious mind, no doubt. All you've done is to bring them forward, so to speak, and rationalise them. It's the usual way, we find," said the Superintendent.

Richardson was dumbfounded by this reasoning. He swallowed, and then said that anything he could do...

The Superintendent gave him a heavy, paternal smile.

"All in good time, sir. We'll be keeping the tabs on you, of course. Well, I think that's all for the present. You can get the bus back to the level crossing from here. You'll know your way from there. We've had to shift your tent a couple of hundred yards away from where you pitched it because we've cordoned off an area around the dead man and you'll find some of my men here and there on the heath, but you'll see your camp all right. Actually, where you'd pitched there'd be quite a bit of bog if we had much rain. You'll be better off on the higher ground where we've put you. How long did you think of staying in the Forest?"

"About another fortnight. A pal is joining me, but he doesn't want to camp, so we're transferring to the New Forest Hunt Hotel."

"Does the hotel know they're to expect you?"

"Oh, yes, of course. I booked the rooms a couple of months ago. I've been having all my meals there, anyway. I mean, the hotel people know I exist."

"I see. Well, I don't suppose I'll need you again, sir, until the inquest."

"So I'm by no means out of the wood!"

"Come, sir, there's not the slightest need for alarm, Even if we are compelled to think of this as foul play, you must remember that, so long as a man is innocent, he has nothing to fear from the police."

"Oh? What about Timothy Thingummy?"

"That, sir," said the Superintendent, "was in London. We don't make mistakes in these parts. We can't afford to. We get little experience of murders around here. They have rarity value, if you take me, and we don't want to waste what is rare, now do we? Besides, sir, it is not at all conclusive that a mistake *was* made in the particular case which you cite. All the same, we shall exercise every care, you may be sure."

"I jolly well hope so!"

The Superintendent looked concerned.

"You seem to be in a jumpy state, sir. Do you feel quite well?"

"Yes, of course, but I'm not used to finding corpses in my tent."

"There has to be a first time for everything, sir. Now, not to worry. You're *quite* sure you didn't know the dead man?"

"Good heavens, of course I didn't! What next?"

"We have to wait on Providence to learn that, sir. Well, we shall be seeing you at the inquest."

On this (to Richardson) sinister note they parted.

# CHAPTER THREE

## Waiting for Denisot

*When you want to find out what day it is, you ask yourself what day it was yesterday, and then what day it will be tomorrow. Then you will know what today is, because it is the day that comes between.*

*Betty and the Bears*  
Hal Eyre

Richardson caught the bus and went back to the New Forest Hunt Hotel. The bar, on a Sunday, was not open until twelve, so, as he had time to kill, he decided to take a walk. There were still his tent and his gear at his camp on the heath, so he made that, the heath, his objective. He was seriously worried.

By that time, on a fine Sunday morning, there were a number of cars on the road and on the common. There were also a number of people on horseback. He walked at a moderate pace but, even so, he soon passed a farm and what, for want of a more exact and functional name, he called the fenced-in pound, and then he reached the open common.

Here he followed the grassy track which, for some way, ran with the gravelled road along which the police car had taken him on the previous night, then he branched off on to a causeway which ran between the gorse and the bog. He



walked beside the ditch until he came to a sparse bit of woodland and the river.

He halted on the wooden bridge and gazed down at the water. It flowed cleanly under the planking and was lost to sight, although not entirely to sound, round a bend on whose bank the bushes grew thickly. On the far side of the bridge, and a little distance down-stream, were four youngish men and an older one. Two of them were carrying shot-guns. The older man wished Richardson good morning as he crossed the bridge; the others stared and then nodded. For a moment he connected them (unreasonably) with the police, but almost immediately he realised that they had no connection whatever with his experiences of the previous night, but were there to pick off the destructive grey squirrels which infested the wood.

There had been some rain in the early hours of the morning (although, deep asleep in the Superintendent's comfortable spare bed, he had not heard it), so that the rough little up-and-down path was treacherously slippery. He skidded his way to the bend which took him across a messy little ditch on to the heath and soon spotted his tent. The police certainly had moved it on to higher ground. It was now about three hundred yards from the river. There was no one on guard over it, but a police car was stationed near the spot on which he had pitched it. He went over to the car. Before he could ask a question, he was recognised by the sergeant, who sat beside the constable driver.

"May I get some of my things?"

"Quite all right to get your things, sir."

"And stow away my tent?"

"Do what you like with your tent. We don't need it any longer. We've about finished here."

"I'm moving into the New Forest Hunt Hotel."

"Very good, sir. I'll let the Superintendent know."

"He does know. I told him so myself."

The sergeant withdrew and Richardson went to his tent. He picked up his pack and inspected the contents. Nothing had been impounded; in fact, it did not appear that anything had been touched. He knew better than to believe this, for the police, in the course of duty, would have looked at everything. All the same, it was a relief to find his belongings intact. He took down the tent and stowed it, waved to the police car without obtaining any response, and tramped, heavily laden, back to the hotel.

To his surprise and relief, his fame had not preceded him. Barney had been discreet and had kept his mouth shut. It seemed reasonable, however, to warn the management that there might be visits from the police, so, having checked in at the office, he told the story of the mysterious dead, but did not mention that there had been two of these.

"Oh, yes?" said the manager. "Well, I know the Superintendent, so that'll be all right. He's in plain clothes and he'll see that anybody he brings here is in plain clothes, too. Don't worry, Mr. Richardson. We expected you and Mr. Bradley last night, but you were otherwise engaged, it seems!"

"Bradley can't come until tomorrow. I don't know what has held him up, but I had a postcard."

"You'll like to see your room, anyway. The porter has the key and has taken your stuff up. Number seventeen. We've given Mr. Bradley number twenty-two on the same floor."

"Thanks." He went upstairs to find his gear neatly stowed and the porter about to go downstairs.

"Will there be anything more, sir?"

"No, thanks, Barney, not until my suitcase turns up."

"Very good, sir." But Barney loitered.

"I don't know anything else," said Richardson. "I spent the night at the police station, but that's not as bad as it sounds, because, actually, the Superintendent put me up in his own house."

"All of a queer do, sir."

"Must have been watching me ever since I began camping up there, I should think, this tramp I mean." Again he made no mention of duplicates.

"Do the police suspect foul play, sir?"

Richardson, alarmed, thought that he had better answer truthfully.

"Well, continue to keep matters under your hat, but I rather fancy they do," he said. "I'm told I may have to attend the inquest."

"You don't know the cause of death, sir?"

"No, I haven't the least idea. I saw no sign of injury, but I wasn't looking for anything of the sort. I wonder how the poor devil of a bobby got on who had to stay on guard up there all night?" (Side-track, he thought. It worked.)

"The Super sent up a car for him to sleep in, and a motor-cycle combination to bring the driver back, so I was told," said the porter.

"Some grape-vine!" said Richardson. "Oh, well, we must wait and see what happens. I suppose I'm free to come and go—I haven't been told I'm not—so I'm going to play golf this afternoon, if the pro can fix me up with clubs and balls. I suppose I can get a game?"

"I'm sure you can, sir. There's a notice to say visitors are welcome. I don't know what sub they expect, but at this time of year it should be easy enough to get a game."

The golf course was a mile and a half outside the village, two and a half from the hotel. Richardson went in to lunch at one o'clock precisely and was driving off from the first tee at two-thirty.

He had been lucky enough to meet the secretary as soon as he arrived, and had been introduced to the local doctor, whose handicap was the same as his own. When the round was finished, Richardson returned the borrowed clubs to the pro, tipped him and said he had enjoyed the game.

"I didn't catch the doctor's name," he added.

The pro repeated it.

"Does the police doctoring round here as well. Seems there's been a corpse up on Medley Heath. Some chap in a little tent. I don't know the rights and wrongs, but all over the place that's spoke of," he added.

"Oh, really? What did he die of?"

"Poison, so they reckon."

"Who do? The police?"

"Them, among others. Doctor Mack you played with just now, got a fine big carryin' voice!"

Richardson wondered whether, had he known that his opponent "did the police doctoring," he would have asked him any questions concerning his findings. He decided that to have done so would have been to risk a snub. As it happened, however, on his way out he met the doctor again just as the latter was getting into his car. The doctor said, immediately, seeing Richardson on foot,

"Oh, can I give you a lift? Which way do you go?"

Richardson named his hotel.

"Splendid. I can drop you on the village side of the level crossing, if that will help."

Richardson said gratefully that it would. The car started up and turned left on to a secondary road lined with fairly pretentious houses. Richardson, deciding that it was now or never, risked the snub which he confidently expected.

"I say," he said, "the pro was telling me about the dead man on the heath, you know."

"Yes?" The doctor kept his eyes on the road ahead, but Richardson detected a slight frown between his thin sandy brows.

"Well, you see, I'm the person who got stuck with the body," he said, "so I'm rather interested."

"How do you mean—stuck with the body?" The frown disappeared.

"I've been camping on my own up on Medley Heath since Thursday. I'd pushed over to the hotel for dinner and

hung around a bit afterwards, having coffee and a brandy, and, when I got back to my tent, there was this dead man.”

“Oh?” The monosyllable invited further confidences.

“So, of course, I called the police and now I think they believe the chap was murdered. I spent the night at the Superintendent’s house. He was very decent, but I don’t think I’m out of his clutches. I’m just wondering *how* the man was killed. I don’t want the police to connect *me* with the job!”

“I can tell you how he was killed. It will be in the papers tomorrow, anyway, so there need be no secret about it. Still, perhaps, you’d better keep it to yourself until it’s public property. He was choked to death with a fir cone.”

“Choked...?”

“With the fruit of the Douglas Fir, to be exact. I recovered an elliptical cone nearly three inches long. Didn’t you notice how suffused the face was?—typical case of asphyxia.”

“No, I didn’t notice. I tried to revive him by that pinch the nose and breathe into the mouth method, but I think I knew he was gone before I started.” (This referred to Colnbrook, he reflected, and realised that he should not have said it.)

“The mouth was very badly bruised, too,” said the doctor, pursuing his own train of thought. “The bruising, of course, is one reason for believing that he was murdered.”

“Well, of course! I mean, surely you couldn’t choke yourself *accidentally* on a fir cone, could you?”

“Hardly, perhaps, but I suppose you could commit suicide that way.”

“Surely not! It would be a beastly way to die!”

“You’d be surprised at how some of them manage it. There was a fellow, some years ago, who slopped petrol all over himself and set himself alight. You wouldn’t think *that* was possible, but he did it.”

The car passed a school and the village hall, and drew up just before it reached the village street. Richardson, expressing gratitude, got out and waited on a lumpy bit of pavement until the car turned a bend in the road. Then he strode away past the shops in the village street, over the footbridge which crossed the water-splash, and made his way back to the hotel.

The doctor (funny swine) had been pulling his leg. Neither of the deaths had been caused by a fir cone. Colnbrook's most certainly had not. If anything of the sort had choked him (only it hadn't) it would have been a surfeit of almonds. There had been faint but unmistakable odour of almonds while Richardson was trying to give him that breath-of-life treatment first recorded in the annals of the prophet Elisha.

*Almonds!*

It could have been suicide, of course, yet, recollecting his sight of the two men on the heath and then on the common, their running togs, their field-glasses and their absorption in the job in hand (whatever it was), it seemed highly unlikely that anything so dramatic as a double suicide could have been in their minds. In addition to this, Colnbrook had been the last person on earth, Richardson felt, to have contemplated such a drastic course. He had given the impression of being far too pleased with A. B. Colnbrook to think of doing away with him.

There was one feasible explanation, of course. One of the men could have murdered the other and then, afraid to face the possible consequences of such an act, have killed himself. There was yet another possibility. When last he had seen them, they had been heading for the heath again. The only dwelling-house they would pass, so far as Richardson knew, was the biggish place from which he had tried to telephone. Could they have been lured in there and murdered?

He visualised the curl-papared maid who had answered the door to him, and this brought to mind her reference to Cook and Shirl. Cooks, he supposed, could and did perform fearful and wonderful deeds, upon occasion—there was that frightful pie-maker of Dusseldorf—or was it Hanover?—but was anybody called Shirl capable of murder?—let alone the goggling, curl-papared specimen who had answered the door. Besides, he did not believe that three *women* would have struggled from that house to the tent with the hulking body of Colnbrook and then taken it away and hidden it and substituted the second body for it. Theoretically this might be possible, but for all practical purposes he felt certain that it was not. Only a *man* would have organised a job such as that.

He was too late for tea at the hotel, but Barney, who met him as he entered, said, with a conspiratorial nod, “Try the kitchen, sir. Mabel’s ‘on’ this afternoon.”

Richardson crossed the uneven, large, ancient tiles of the kitchen, beyond which lay the modern annexe in which the cooking and serving were done, and turned off to the right, past the foot of a servants’ staircase, also part of the original house, which had been built, very narrow and steep, in the thickness of the wall. It led up to the second floor and the porter’s bedroom.

In the room past the bottom of this staircase, Mabel was busy washing up. She desisted as Richardson came in and hooked a chair up to a large, scrubbed, wooden table. As was her invariable habit, she grinned widely but did not speak. She made fresh tea, put out bread and butter, jam and a sponge sandwich, and, jerking her head, indicated that he might set to.

“We’ve had Carrie’s boyfriend, the policeman, here this afternoon. Tell us about the murder,” she said, when Tom had drunk his third cup of tea. Richardson, in a low tone,

gave her a carefully edited account of what had happened. At the end, she stood with her arms akimbo, studied his fresh complexion and boyish, candid face, and shook her head.

“He’s wrong. The police are all wrong. It can’t be you. Ain’t got the nerve,” she said. “No more nor me. Takes nerve, it do, to bring off a nice clean murder. No, Mr. Richardson, it wouldn’t be your sort of lark, no more nor it wouldn’t be mine, whatever Carrie’s boy friend may say.”

Richardson felt that the Delphic Oracle had spoken. He did not even resent the slur cast upon his courage. What Mabel believed today he hoped and trusted that the police would believe tomorrow. He thanked her for the tea, went into the small drawing-room which served to house the visitors’ library and, most days, an irascible ex-Naval officer, and, surveying the volumes on the bookshelves, took down E. F. Benson’s masterpiece, *The Luck of the Vails*, trusting that the flute-playing villainies of Mr. Francis Vail would blot out, for a space, his own anxieties and problems.

The anodyne worked. Somewhere a clock struck the half-hour. Richardson took the book to his room, and, putting it on the bedside table, went off for a bath before dinner.

After dinner, the mixed feeling of being, at the same time, in a trap and at a loose end, assailed him again, but a joyful surprise was in store. He was loitering in the front hall, trying to decide between the respective attractions of *The Luck of the Vails* and the television lounge, when the front door opened and in came the porter with a couple of suitcases. He was followed by a slender, tall young man with thick brown hair and wide-apart grey eyes. The young man was carrying a violin case in one hand and a flute, cased in leather, in the other.

“Oh, Lord!” exclaimed Richardson, joyfully. “Uncle Francis Vail in person! Well, well, well!”

The newcomer apparently understood the reference.



"Oh, Geoffrey," he said reproachfully, naming one of the heroes in the book, "I did so hope that people would mistake it for a telescope. Then it would seem as though I'd been in the Navy. It's a terribly good thing to have been in, and I should be much respected if people thought I'd ever belonged to it. Are you *sure* it doesn't look like a telescope? It's really meant to look like one, you know." He put the flute in its case to his eye.

"Quite sure, Scab, you lunatic. Come and sign the book. Which is his room, Barney? I've forgotten."

"Number twenty-two, sir. I'll get the key."

"And is our escutcheon still unsullied, or have you been up to something?" asked Denis, in his disconcerting way.

"I've been up to something," said Richardson. "Are you hungry, or shall I a tale unfold?"

"I dined in Winchester with a bloke I know. Is there a bar here?"

"There is. Let me lead you to it."

"Right. I'll dump my kit and then I'll join you."

"I'll put the car away while you're dumping. Somehow I don't think we're going to need it tomorrow."

They met in the bar a quarter of an hour later.

"Tell me why we shan't need the car," said Denis, over a pint of bitter. "I thought you were going to walk your legs off while you were alone, and that we were to ride in the stately limousine as soon as I turned up. Incidentally, I'm sorry for the delay, but I got let in for playing polo."

"You mean you preferred playing polo to getting down here when you said you would? Then it serves you right that you've missed all the fun of being my fellow gaolbird."

"You don't say!"

"I do say. I've been scared out of my wits until now, but I don't seem to care quite so much now *you've* turned up."

"Absolutely the right spirit. Tell me all. I can see you've lost weight since last we met."

Richardson told him all. It was a straightforward narrative but, as Denis remarked at the end of it, fraught with unusual interest.

"There's only one thing to do," he said.

"Confess, and get myself hanged?"

"That would be going too far and is, in any case, unnecessary. No, what you need, at this crisis in a young man's affairs, is the advice and assistance of my great-aunt."

"Not Lady Selina?"

"Perish the thought! I refer to the one and only Dame Beatrice. Your corpses will be meat and drink to her."

"Dame Beatrice? But?—Oh, she wouldn't take me on, would she? I mean, I've never even met her!"

"The loss is hers and can soon be remedied."

"You'll really ask her?"

"Yes, of course, and I know she'll come. You must tell her everything, you know, just as you've told it to me. No hedging or ditching. She can't be expected to work with blinkers on. Your two rows with Colnbrook must be exposed with all their low-life implications and you'll have to confess that you saw these two birds on the heath, so that you knew they were in the neighbourhood. And if I were you," continued Denis earnestly, "I'd come clean to the Superintendent, too. He's bound to dig it all out sooner or later—the police do, you know—and you'll be in a far stronger position if the information comes from you in the first place."

"Well, I don't know about that," said Richardson, very doubtfully. "I'm certain that he suspects me, whereas Dame Beatrice, I take it, will not."

"She'll start from scratch, keeping an open mind. Still, you have an ingenuous, unbearded sort of face and are obviously frightened to death, so perhaps she'll give you the benefit of the doubt."

“You *are* a Job’s comforter!” said Richardson; but he looked quite happy again.

“Meanwhile,” Denis added, “I will bend my own not inconspicuous intellect to your problem and let you know my conclusions in the morning. Sleep well!”

# CHAPTER FOUR

## In Search of a Body

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds Admit  
impediments.*

Shakespeare

“What we ought to do,” said Denis, on the following morning, “and I’ve slept on this, I might tell you, because it actually occurred to me last night when I got to bed...”

“Is to tell the Superintendent there’s Colnbrook’s body hidden away somewhere. He won’t believe us, you know. Besides...”

“You go too fast. Let me finish. It occurred to me last night, as I tossed restlessly on my pillow, that what we must do is to *find* that second body—or, rather, that *first* body—*before* they hold the inquest on the body found in your tent by the police.”

“But how on earth can we do that?”

“We will quarter the ground. Isn’t there a riding stables at hand? We shall hire a couple of docile, trustworthy hacks and look for clues.”

“What about Dame Beatrice?”

“Fun first, business later. Must you have still *another* piece of toast?”

“Yes, really I must. But, about the horses...”

“Unreliable, you think?”

"I don't think that. I *do* think we'd be much better off on foot—that is, if we really *must* look for Colnbrook."

"Why? I loathe a lot of walking."

"Very well. You ride, I'll walk, and we'll compare notes at lunch."

"Not a bad idea. Where do I find these riding stables?"

"The other side of the water-splash. Don't go through the splash or over the footbridge. Keep straight on and then turn left. There's a footpath across a bit of common."

"It sounds complicated. I'll walk with you."

"All right. It's a far better idea, really it is."

So the two young men set out for the site of Richardson's camp. Denis had a camera and photographed a Forest pony and her half-grown chestnut foal. Three-quarters of the way along the beautiful road which led to the common, he insisted upon stopping at the "pound" to obtain a picture of a farmer, his wife, and his cowman urging an extremely lively bull calf to climb up a ramp into a lorry. Richardson was impatient to get on, and was almost dancing by the time his friend was satisfied.

"Nobody would think I'm threatened with the hangman," he complained, when at last they were on their way again. "Now don't waste any more time, and do forget that blasted box camera of yours for a bit. I didn't even bring mine."

They soon reached the causeway. It led away from the gravelled road and ran straight and true (and was, in places, extremely muddy) between the sparsely-planted young pines and the heather, by the side of the drainage ditches, until it entered the narrow wood. Here Denis stood still and gazed about him.

"Rather good, isn't it?" said Richardson.

"How did you find the way here in the first place?" Denis demanded. "You didn't know the neighbourhood, did you?"

“Oh, I thought I’d told you that I came down one Saturday, ages ago, and nosed around and prospected and so forth. Mind you, I didn’t tell the Superintendent that. It wouldn’t do to let him think I knew the countryside before I got let in for this business.”

“I see. Do we cross this little bridge?”

“We do, and follow the path to the right.”

They did this, and watched the sunshine and shadow on the stream before going on again. After a bit they came upon a gate which led into an enclosure. Denis indicated the gate.

“Can we go this way?”

“I suppose so, although I never have. It’s only on a latch, so it’s all right, so long as we shut it after us. Looks as though the foresters have been busy.”

The inviting path on the other side of the gate was broad and clearly marked, and bore the imprint, here and there, where the ground was soft, of car tyres and caterpillar wheels. Denis produced a magnifying glass and studied the imprints with exaggerated thoroughness.

“No hoof-prints,” he observed. They walked on again, past the grey, smooth trunks of a couple of felled beeches on the right-hand side of the path, and a magnificent Scots pine, prone across the bracken, on the left. The path mounted gradually. Suddenly Denis, who was in the lead, stopped sort. “I’m going back,” he said. A gaggle of geese, eight in all, had formed a line across the path, which led straight into a farmyard. “Geese horrify me. I’d rather face a pride of lions.”

“There’s a dog, too,” said Richardson, in practical tones. “Besides, about geese I really do agree. I told you I’d never been this way, and now you see that my instinct was sound.”

They retraced their steps and again followed the path beside the water. It narrowed and grew lumpy and then muddy. Then it turned almost at right-angles on to a miry

track which led across the gravelled road and on to the open heath. Richardson pointed out the big house from which he had tried to telephone.

"You don't think there's anything suspicious in the circumstance that the owner of the house happened to be away on the very day you discovered a dead man in your tent?" Denis suggested.

"Oh, I hardly imagine so. Just a coincidence, I would say. And I certainly don't attach any importance to the fact that the maid wouldn't let me use the telephone. For all she knew, it might have been an impudent attempt on my part to get into the house with burglarious intentions. Besides, women-servants always think somebody is determined to murder them in their beds, although why in their beds I can't think. One would suppose the last thing to do on their part would be to stay in bed if a homicidal maniac was loose about the place. Personally, I should want to be up and about, preferably with my shoes on."

"Yes, it's odd how helpless one feels with bare feet if there's any rough stuff going—Judo excepted, of course. Where do we go from here?"

"We follow the main track as far as those gorse bushes and then branch off on to a kind of secondary track which pretty well follows the flow of the river."

Pursuing this course, they soon came upon the former site of Richardson's camp. It was marked by two young oak trees, about fifteen yards apart, which formed a landmark against the surrounding gorse and some low-growing thorn trees. More gorse and bracken screened the little clearing from the main track, but Richardson, who had chosen the spot because, besides being easily identifiable, it was secluded, now looked upon it with a different eye. He indicated the gorse and said,

"Somebody could have lain up hidden and watched my movements. I'd never have known he was there."

Denis did not answer. He searched all the tiny paths which ran among the gorse. Richardson strolled over in the opposite direction, that in which the river, shallow at this point, ran with a quietly insistent murmur over the stones. Denis soon joined him. When they were together again, Richardson remarked,

“You know, it occurs to me that it would have been frightfully easy to have brought the body across the river from the other side. Come and see.”

He led the way to where a loop in the stream had laid bare two spits of gravel. They were not opposite one another, but lay in a long slant with perhaps twelve yards of very shallow water between them. Denis looked long and thoughtfully at this possible ford.

“I don’t know about that,” he said. “Could be, I suppose. Let’s see how the road runs.”

They made their way along the secondary track until it joined the main one. Then, following this until it met the gravelled road, they turned to the left and crossed the bridge.

“This will be it,” said Richardson. They stepped on to rough grass and found themselves among trees. There was no marked path, but the trees, mostly pines, were not very close together and it was easy enough to follow the course of the stream. It was at this point that the hotel collie manifested himself and joined them.

“Damn that dog!” said Richardson. He stooped and fondled the collie. It bounded along, barking joyously.

“Yes, you’re right,” said Denis. “How big and heavy was this chap you saw? Colnbrook, I mean.”

“Oh, I really don’t know! You don’t go trying to judge height and weight when you find a dead man in your tent! All I remember about Colnbrook is that he was about my height and seemed fairly chunky. Why?”

“Oh, well, I was only wondering—if he *was* murdered, I mean—whether it was the work of only one person. Still, I



suppose the police will establish that. Of course, I'm hoping it was accidental, or that he was taken ill. Where do we go now?"

"Well, it's all a bit circumscribed, really, for all that it looks a vast expanse. You'd think that wood over on the far side would lead somewhere, but, actually, it peters out on this side of the stream. There's almost a right-angle bend."

"Let's have a look, anyway," said Denis.

"You know," said Richardson, as they left the stream and took a broad track marked heavily by caterpillar wheels, car tyres, and hoof-prints which led over the heath to the wood, "I do so wish I'd told the police I'd met Colnbrook before. It'll be absolutely ruinous for me if it comes out now—that is, if the death *wasn't* accidental."

"Oh, the police aren't going to worry too much about that," said Denis easily. "They understand panic. Besides, as we learned in our youth, the best way to get out of difficulties is to tell a lie, a good lie, and stick to it. You only had an electric torch, remember, and you certainly weren't expecting to find a dead man in your tent. How well *did* you know this blighter, anyway? I know you met him again after you socked him on that cross-country run. You remember telling me about that?"

"I've never seen or heard of him since, until this wretched business, except for the railway station episode."

"Then, if you'll pardon my bluntness of speech, what the hell are you worrying about? Those incidental manifestations of the sporting spirit are two a penny. If *he* had murdered *you*, it might have been a bit different, although, I think, not very much. Your socking him *could* have supplied him with the shadow of a motive, I suppose. But, in the case under review, having put it across him for criticising your birth and breeding, you'd satisfied your ego and had no more use for vengeance, and he responded by landing you with that girl. My advice is to see the facts

clearly and see them whole, and then, for God's sake, to forget all about them."

There was a silence as they tramped onwards towards the woods. It lasted a full two minutes. Then Richardson said, "Thanks. That clears the air." He sounded doubtful, however.

"Look here, why have you got it so firmly into your bean that he *was* murdered?" demanded Denis. "You didn't notice any injury?"

"I didn't stop to notice anything much. I do just remember a slight smell of almonds when I tried to revive him, you know."

"Well, you did what you could when you telephoned from the hotel. Incidentally, I don't for a moment believe that we're going to find his body, however much we trek around. The chap or chaps—and I distinctly favour the plural—who exchanged the corpses will have taken him far enough away from here."

"I'm not so sure," said Richardson, "that I want to find his body, after all. Won't the police think it damned fishy if we do?"

Denis considered this point.

"I see what you mean," he said. "Perhaps I was feeling a bit over-enthusiastic when we started out. I quite see that it's better, from your point of view, to have your tent connected with a dead bloke whom you *didn't* know, than with somebody whom you did. Oh, yes, I think you may have got something there. Nevertheless, I'm enjoying the walk, so, after all, perhaps we needn't start beating the undergrowth and peering into bushes and all that. We'll just toddle on and enjoy the scenery."

They entered the woods and soon found themselves again on the banks of the stream. It was deep and dark-brown here, and it flowed in steady silence under the trees. There was no path. On the opposite side of the water a woodman and his mate were felling a tree. The two young

men stayed for a few minutes to watch, and greetings were exchanged across the stream.

"Well," said Denis, as they turned left and came out of the woods, "whichever way either of those dead men came or was taken, it couldn't have been *this* way. Nobody, either on foot or in a car, could have forded the river hereabouts. Let's do a long cast round and walk our legs off."

This seemed a reasonable suggestion, but they were not allowed to follow it up. The "long cast round" foreshadowed by Denis brought them to the edge of another and a greater wood. This wood, moreover, was an enclosure and admittance to it was gained by several widely-spaced gates, to one of which a rudimentary track brought the walkers. At this gate Denis paused. The enclosure was bounded by a strong fence, but the gate was on a latch.

"Shall we?" he asked, unfastening the gate without waiting for an answer. The two of them entered the unresisting fastness and Denis closed the gate behind them. The young men found themselves on a kind of raised banking and among trees, undergrowth and—so slowly does water dry away in the thickly-wooded parts of the Forest—pools of considerable size.

"Let's run," said Richardson. Denis groaned, but complied with the obliquely-expressed command. He was not a talented runner. He lacked Richardson's style and easy grace, and, as they jumped a ditch which carried a sluggish stream athwart their path, he slipped on an over-irrigated patch of earth, fell over the dog, and took a toss into some bushes. The dog barked with irrational enthusiasm and then began to howl. Denis picked himself up, but, even so, found that he could not keep his footing.

From somewhere near at hand a voice called,

"Hi, you there! Stop a minute, will yer?" A forester with an axe appeared in the clearing. "There be a dead man hereabouts. Us had to shift un out of our way. You'd best go and fetch the police. Us haven't got time," he said.

# CHAPTER FIVE

## Sacred Status of Great-Aunt

*It would be unfaithful to nature, and, therefore, unworthy of my pen, were I to represent my young hero as totally guiltless of those common failings to which inexperienced youth is, for the most part, liable.*

*The Life of a Sportsman*  
Nimrod

Laura Gavin (née Menzies) was singing a hymn. Her son Hamish was joining in with more enthusiasm than tonal quality.

"See here hath been daw-aw-ning another new day," bawled Hamish, out of tune but enjoyably. He broke off. "But it rains, all the same," he added, in his ordinary voice.

"So it does," said mother's employer, Dame Beatrice Adela Lestrangle Bradley, coming into the morning-room of the Stone House, Wandles Parva.

"Good morning, Mrs. Croc., dear," said Laura.

"Good morning, Mrs. Dame, dear," said her son, minding his manners.

"The post," said Laura, producing several letters.

"There's one in Denis's handwriting. You'd better read it for you-self at breakfast. I haven't opened it."

"*At breakfast,*" said Hamish, with deep meaning. The party took seats at table and Hamish, proud of this

accomplishment, poured himself out some coffee. "And then I have to get along to the vicarage. Latin, mathematics, and English literature." He paused to consider this programme, sighed and then announced that he would have grapefruit, porridge, bacon—and—eggs—and—kidneys—and—sausage—and—mustard—and—toast—and—butter—and—marmalade—and—a—second—cup of coffee." He drew breath.

"That's what Daddy has," he explained, in a confidential aside to Dame Beatrice, his devoted and trusted ally. "Actually, I don't really like kidneys, but I eat them, just the same. When I go to school after Easter I suppose I shall always be carnivorously hungry."

Breakfast proceeded smoothly, but Laura cocked an interested eye, from time to time (and in the intervals between the courses of her son's outrageously enormous meal), on her employer. Automatically dealing with a mushroom omelette which Laura was convinced she did not know she was eating, Dame Beatrice was reading and rereading her grand-nephew's letter. She finished the omelette in an absent-minded way and took a piece of Melba toast.

"Denis is always anxious to help lame dogs over stiles," she observed, "although why lame dogs should wish to climb stiles I have never been able to determine. One would think they preferred to find a way through a hedge."

"What's Denis got to say?" enquired Laura, ignoring her son's attempts to float a small piece of bread on the coffee he had poured on to an empty plate. "Is he going to Spitzbergen?"

"No, he is in the New Forest, or so he says, and there is no reason to disbelieve him, for the postmark bears him out. He seems to have uncovered a murder or so."

"Atta-baby!" said Laura warmly.

"What does it *mean*" asked Hamish. His mother took no notice of him, the only effectual way she had ever

discovered of blocking difficult questions. Dame Beatrice gave him an answer, however. She believed in being courteous to children.

"It is your mother's way of stating that she has taken the bit between her teeth, dear boy."

"Is my mother a horse?"

"No, not even a mare—except in French, of course, when the word is spelt a little differently—but soon she will be *riding* a horse and for you we shall hire a New Forest pony when you come down at the week-end."

"Atta-baby!" said Hamish, convinced that this must be a magic word, for he was an observant child and had noted that his mother's use of the expression always seemed to preface something pleasant and adventurous. "But couldn't you take Peggy? I'm more used to Peggy, you see."

"No, because we do not possess a horse-box. Besides, all boys should learn to manage more than one pony. Think of the broncho-busters. They can ride anything."

Hamish digested this conception of his future and was so entranced by it that he remained silent and ruminative for nearly three minutes. Then he said a rapid grace and slid down from his chair.

"May I leave the table?"

"Certainly. And thank goodness!" said Laura, the first word aloud and the rest *sotto voce*. "Now, then, Mrs. Croc., come again. What murders, how committed, and by whom?"

"Denis has joined a friend named Tom Richardson for a fortnight's holiday. He was late getting to the hotel and the friend slept in a small tent until Denis arrived. A dead man was found in the tent one night. Richardson recognised him, but did not tell the police so. However, by the time the police arrived at the tent, the body had been exchanged for another which Richardson did *not* recognise. Now he and Denis have discovered the first body. They want us to go along and look into the matter."

“Well, we’re on the border of the New Forest ourselves. What’s stopping us?”

“Nothing, child. Are you content to leave Hamish with Henri and Célestine?”

“They’ll spoil him, as usual, but it will be fine to escape from his clutches for a bit. I call him a demented, demoniac child.”

“That is much the best kind of child to have,” said Dame Beatrice serenely. “Ring the bell and we will break the news to the foster-parents.”

An hour later she and Laura, driven by Dame Beatrice’s imperturbable chauffeur George, were on their way to the New Forest Hunt Hotel. The main Bournemouth road ran between glades and groves, between beeches and oaks, past woodland rides and blindingly dazzling contrasts of shade and sun. Forest ponies cropped grass at the roadside or stood, heedless of fast-moving traffic, in the middle of the road itself. Once Laura caught sight of deer and once a stoat, like a shadow, slipped across in front of the car.

Just before they reached the small village, they took a turning to the right and found themselves in a blind little lane, all twists and difficult bends. Then they came out upon a common and George accelerated a little. The hotel stood out, a landmark, but not a stark or an ugly one, on the far side of an enormous expanse of green. They made towards it. The lane took a right-hand turn and they pulled up on a gravel frontage.

Denis had been apprised of their coming, for his great-aunt had caused Laura to telephone the hotel from Lyndhurst. He was on the steps of the hotel when they arrived. He greeted them affectionately.

“Come and meet Tom Richardson, about whom is all the hoo-ha,” he said. “Sorry it’s still too early for a drink. Tom’s in the garden exercising the hotel dog.” He led the way through a handsome entrance hall, at the end of which a bright fire was burning, and along a passage to a side-door

which opened on to a well-kept gravel path. Richardson and the handsome collie were at the far end of the garden, and both came running as soon as Richardson saw Denis and his companions, the tall young man covering the grass with the easy effortless strides of a trained athlete, the dog beside him bounding and joyously barking. Denis performed the introductions.

“Sorry it’s too early for a drink,” said Richardson.

“Yes, I’ve already broken the sad news, but,” said Denis, looking at his watch, “in twenty-two and a half minutes’ time it will be just right and we will all pour into the bar and jangle the cow-bells. I love doing that. Much nicer and far more musical than banging on the counter with half a crown and shouting, “Service, miss!” I don’t think they’d like that here—hence the cow-bells. Swiss and genuine, just like Tom Sawyer’s tooth, except that that was American, not Swiss. Now, where are we going to sit while we let time pass?”

“The bar really is the best place,” said Richardson. “It’s used as a lounge, anyway. Besides, it’s vast and comfortable and we can talk there without worrying about being overheard. It’s too chilly to sit in the garden, and the small drawing-room is in possession of the old boy of ex-naval aspect who seems to think it’s his private sanctum, and the television lounge is thick with people propped up behind morning papers and waiting, like us, for the bar to open, so that’s no good for a private get-together.”

“The bar it is,” said Denis. He led the way, and Laura, from an armchair in the window, was soon working out the story of an eighteenth-century fox-hunt as told by the patterns on the curtains. Dame Beatrice ignored the decorative nature of the furnishings and concentrated on Richardson.

“Now, dear child,” she said. Richardson, who had been warned by Denis to expect this nominative of address, smiled wanly, hitched the knees of his trousers a little higher and asked her where he ought to begin. She told him.



Soon she was in possession of as much of the story as Richardson thought it necessary to tell her.

"So," said Dame Beatrice, looking up from the notes she had been scribbling, "you have informed the police of the body which the two of you found in the woods, but you did *not* tell them that it was this same body which you found in your tent and which was subsequently removed and another body substituted."

"I didn't think they'd believe me. I did try to tell the Superintendent, near the beginning of things, that I didn't think the second body was the one I'd reported to him over the phone, but he didn't seem interested, so I thought I'd better let it go at that."

"Hm!" said Dame Beatrice. "But, as that first body has turned up again, he may well take an interest *now*, if you tell him that you recognise it as the one you attempted to mention previously, when he was not prepared to listen to you."

"Poor old Tom is stressing that he thinks he will be a bit in the red if he now confesses he recognises this first-and-third corpse," said Denis, "because he knew him beforehand and they had a bit of a row—none of Tom's seeking—on a cross-country run, and, also, another small *fracas*."

"Was there bloodshed?" asked Dame Beatrice. "You did not mention these feuds just now."

"No," said Tom, "no bloodshed."

"Threats uttered in front of witnesses?"

"There weren't any witnesses the first time except a few cows."

"And the testimony of cows, rendered, if at all, in a language *not* recognised in a court of law, would be valueless, you think? You may be right. Why, then, are we cast down?"

"Somebody's got it in for me," said Tom, "else why pick on my tent both times?"

"Your tent was conveniently to hand, I should imagine, and that was one reason for making free with it. The interesting thing to find out will be why it was not used a third time. That would have been delightful."

Richardson looked at her incredulously and Denis laughed.

"You mustn't mind Aunt Adela," he said. "Her mind functions like that." He turned to Laura, who had worked out the sequence of events as told by the curtains. "What say you, dear Dog?"

"Where did this cross-country run take place?" asked Laura. "Anywhere at all in this neighbourhood?"

"Well, no, not really. It was Winchester way. We started from that bridge by the old mill at King Alfred's end of the high street and we were sent off in twos, one from each team. It was very different from the ordinary cross-country free-for-all, because all you had to do was beat your opposite number. There were only a dozen members in each team and we were sent off at five-minute intervals."

"So it took an hour before the last pair could be sent off," commented Laura.

"And you and this Mr. Colnbrook were the last to go, I take it," said Dame Beatrice.

"We were; but how do you know?"

"It was merely a guess. I went by the fact that you say there were no witnesses of your quarrel except the cows. In cross-country running, so different from sub-four-minute miling, five-minute intervals are not long ones and, in open country, over which some of your way surely would have taken you, the pair, if any, behind you must surely have seen something of the *fracas*, for you and your opponent stopped short, no doubt, in order to settle your differences. I deduce, therefore, that nobody was behind you."

"Yes, I see."

"And how did this cross-country competition come about?"

"The fixture was made at their request. Their secretary wrote that they had a vacant date and would like to meet us."

"Was the unusual nature of the match mentioned in the correspondence?"

"No. Until we met them we had concluded that it would be the ordinary cross-country run, with the usual points system of scoring."

"And that is?"

"Roughly speaking, the first man home counts as one, the second two, and so on. The team with the smallest number of points is the winner."

"And what did your team think of the new arrangement?"

"Oh, the blokes didn't mind. In cross-country running you go for the fun of it. At least, I always do. I think everybody thought it was quite an idea. Of course, if it ever became the usual thing, you'd need to seed your runners if both teams were to get the ultimate out of it."

"The best against the best, the weakest against the weakest, I suppose?"

"That's it. But, as I say, we didn't really mind what the arrangements were. They were the hosts, you see, and I must say they did their stuff nobly afterwards."

"You imply?"

"The drinks and the supper, and so on."

"Is the other team based on Winchester?"

"Oh, no. Somewhere near Southampton. I went there—yes, I went there once, I remember, with other of our officials." His voice tailed off, but Dame Beatrice appeared not to notice this. She went on,

"And your team? Where do all of *you* come from?"

"We come from all over the place. Berks, Bucks, and Oxon mostly. Our secretary lives in Surrey and the treasurer hangs out in Kent. A representative body, one might say, take us all in all."

“Do you have many outside competitions?”

“As many as we can get. We don’t do much on the track, because we haven’t got a ground, so it’s mostly cross-country. Anyway, most of us like it that way. It’s cheaper than golf!”

“How did your club come to be formed?”

“I don’t know, really. Chaps knew other chaps, and, before we came down, there was a sort of meeting and some of us agreed to join.”

“It sounds very casual.”

“Oh, yes,” said Richardson earnestly, “it is. That’s the beauty of it. Nobody’s bound to turn out. You get the notice—usually at some dashed awkward time when you’ve already fixed up to do something quite other—and you don’t have to answer. You just roll up or not, exactly as you please.”

“And the result of this idyllic arrangement?”

“Curiously enough, quite a lot of people do roll up. There’s some sort of psychological explanation, I shouldn’t wonder. Oh, dash it! I forgot! *You’re* a psychologist, aren’t you?”

Dame Beatrice cackled, and Laura remarked that she herself had noticed that where there was no compulsion there was often a better response than when a press-gang was at work.

“You say that you took care not to be seated near Mr. Colnbrook at the supper,” said Dame Beatrice. “Could you tell whether he still felt animosity towards you?”

“Well, he wasn’t very pleased when, on the run-in, I beat him, but I did make the distance between us as narrow as I could. I had to win, of course, because of scoring for the team, otherwise I’d have let him beat me to it.”

“You did not know whether your team really needed your help, I suppose?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, I did. Those who had finished in front of us were howling their heads off, particularly the

opposition, so I thought I'd better pull it off."

"Well, I should think you're in the clear, all right," said Laura. "You couldn't have had any reason at all to wish Colnbrook out of this world. You won the scrap and you won the race. It was for *him* to wish *you* to hell, not vice-versa."

"Exactly my opinion," said Denis.

"I shall be interested to hear what is said at the inquest," said Dame Beatrice, "but, like Laura, I cannot see that you have anything to fear provided that you have related all that you know about Mr. Colnbrook."

"Oh, I say, are you really going to attend the inquest?" said Richardson, ignoring the insinuation. "That's most awfully good of you. I'm not looking forward to it much. It's rotten in the middle of a holiday. Oh, look! They're taking down the shutters. That means the bar's open. Now, Dame Beatrice, what can I get you?"

Nothing serious was said or done until after lunch, but, when the party left the dining-room, Dame Beatrice took her grand-nephew aside, leaving Richardson to escort Laura.

"Why is your friend so nervous about all this?" she asked. "*Can* he be involved in any way? After all, he tried to tell the police about the exchange of bodies, it appears. He could do no more if they refused to allow him to explain."

"I think he got wind-up when we came upon Colnbrook's body in those woods," said Denis. "It really *was* the toughest kind of luck that we should be the people to stumble on it like that. It's as though some malignant fate is dogging Tom down here, and the worst of it is that I really was responsible for suggesting we had a look for Colnbrook."

"Yes?" said Dame Beatrice doubtfully. "You have no reason to think that Mr. Richardson knew perfectly well where Mr. Colnbrook's body was, and deliberately led you to its discovery?"

"Good Lord, no, of course not! That's a fantastic suggestion, darling great-aunt. Besides, the forester said

they'd moved it from where they found it. It was in their way."

"Very likely," his great-aunt agreed. "But, as Laura would say, it is as well to explore all avenues. What made him pitch a tent up there on the heath when he would have been far more comfortable sleeping here in the hotel? I understand that he took all his meals here, including his breakfast."

"Well, he's a solitary sort of old lunatic, you know. I doubt whether he's got a close pal in the world besides myself. I gather that he wanted to do a bit of badger-watching and so forth, and, of course, I did let him down. I couldn't help it, but there it was. He had two days more on his own than we'd planned. It was damned bad luck that this business of two dead men should have cropped up."

"Yes. One might argue that one dead man was enough. Two..."

"Overdoing it? I agree. But what's the answer?"

"That is what we have to find out, dear child."

"In the old days, I got half a crown when you called me that. Do you remember?"

"I hardly think that you are in dire need of half a crown in these days."

"You never know," said Denis.

"What is this athletics club of which Mr. Richardson is a member? And what kind of people are the other members?"

"They call themselves the Hen-Harriers—a sort of play upon words, if you take me, although they don't have women members. They're a casual bunch, as he indicated. They're the sort of chaps who ran as second strings for their colleges in the three miles when they were up—third strings, most likely—plus a sprinkling of hockey players who turn up for cross-country running when they haven't a fixture, or, more likely, when a fixture falls through at the last minute. Happy-go-lucky types, I should say, on the whole. I only know what Tom tells me about them."

"You would not call them a desperately keen band?"

"Lord, no! They really do run for the fun of it, and, if nobody bothers to finish, well, nobody bothers!"

"It sounds an ideal arrangement."

"Oh, it is, and old Tom enjoys it. He has to be pubbable and clubbable, you see, and it's jolly good for him, otherwise he'd probably turn into every kind of hermit."

"Girls?"

"He's a bit like the hero of *She Stoops to Conquer*—good with barmaids, but otherwise, I fear, not even a spent force, although I did hear a rumour that he might be getting engaged. I haven't met the girl."

"What does he do for a living?"

"Oh, prep-school master, as long as he can stick the school, and then a bit of private tutoring while he works up steam to apply for another post. Lives with a widowed mother who, I gather, has plenty of dough. What Tom really ought to do is to write, but his first novel was turned down by the only two publishers he sent it to, and that seems to have soured on the boy. He's by way of being Shelley's original sensitive plant."

"Interesting."

"You can tell the sort of chap he is by the way he's taking these deaths. They can't possibly be anything to do with him, but his attitude is that the black cap is already on the judge's head. It gets fatiguing. It will be a jolly good thing when the inquest is over and he can breathe again."

"How did you come to make his acquaintance?"

"A common interest in music."

"Does he play an instrument?"

"No, but he understands the Elizabethans."

Dame Beatrice, who understood Bach and nobody else, allowed this statement to pass without challenge.

Richardson and Laura were in the garden admiring the dahlias and some late carnations and Denis and his great-aunt were walking on the finely-cut lawn.

“In what way do you think I can help your friend?” Dame Beatrice enquired. She bent to pick up a handsome fir-cone which had fallen from *Pinus Pinea*, the Stone Pine (introduced, as she remarked to her great-nephew, four hundred years ago, in the time [more or less] of his friend’s Elizabethans), and studied it while Denis answered,

“Well, I think you’ve given his *morale* a considerable boost by coming down here at all, and now he knows you’re going to attend the inquest it’s made his day. What do you want to do this afternoon? See the spot where we found Colnbrook’s body?”

“No, child. Did I understand from Mr. Richardson that Mr. Colnbrook belonged to an association of mixed athletes (in the sense, I mean, of the way one describes a co-educational school as being mixed) called the Scylla and District Club?”

“Yes, that’s Colnbrook’s mob. Social and Athletic, they call themselves, according to Tom. They’ve got a ground of sorts, somewhere outside Southampton. I expect you heard him say so. They’ve had one or two good people—steeplechasers, mostly—but not exactly world class, I believe. I don’t much follow athletics. Anyway, they’re a pretty minor club, the same as Tom’s lot.”

“By which you mean—?”

“Well, they’re not exactly Achilles, or Poly. Harriers, or Herne Hill or Thames Valley, for example.”

“I see.” There was a pause, then Dame Beatrice added, “Perhaps, when we have attended the inquest, your friend will honour me with *the whole* of his confidence. I dislike to work on half-truths.”



# CHAPTER SIX

## Inquests Are Odious

*Poisoned with henbane. His whole body stinks of it.*

Jerome K. Jerome

The inquests on Colnbrook and the so-far unnamed body also dumped in Richardson's tent were held separately but on the same day. Richardson was called as a witness in both cases. Accepting Dame Beatrice's advice (in the tradition that drowning men clutch at straws, and having about as much faith in the result), he had been to the Superintendent to tell him that he recognised the body he and Denis had found in the woods as that of the first deceased occupant of his tent. The Superintendent (suspiciously so, in Richardson's opinion) had been friendly and almost jocose.

"So we shall see what we *shall* see, sir," he had said, in termination of the interview.

"What's that mean?" Richardson had demanded.

"Now, now, sir, there's no reason to be nervous. The truth, the whole truth, and nothing *but* the truth, you know." He insisted upon shaking hands at parting.

The so-far unidentified body came first, and the court learnt that it was that of one Edward Makepeace Thackeray Bunt, an ex-member and cross-country club-record-holder of the Scylla and District A.C.

“You’ve nothing to worry about, then,” murmured Denis to Richardson. “It’s all the same bunch. One of them has bought it, mark my words.”

Richardson grunted his incredulity at the suggestion that he had nothing to worry about. He knew better. He had spent almost sleepless nights in the hotel. Bunt was identified by his father, an older, bearded edition of the dead man. The medical evidence was clear and remained unchallenged. The deceased had died from a fatal dose of hydrocyanic acid, better known to the layman as prussic acid. (There was no mention of fir cones!)

The police asked for an adjournment after the evidence of identification and the medical evidence had been concluded. It was clear they suspected that Bunt had been murdered, in spite of the fact, well known to the medical profession, that prussic acid is a suicide’s agent, although not, at that, a very common one.

Richardson’s protagonist, Colnbrook, was identified by his sister, who did not appear to be greatly upset by the proceedings. In his case the medical evidence was that he had taken potassium cyanide, a more commonly used preparation than hydrocyanic acid and therefore more readily come by.

Neither Denis nor Richardson was called upon to testify to the finding of the body in the woods. The police had investigated their account of the matter and the forester to whom they had spoken was severely dealt with by the coroner.

“At what time did you come upon the body?”

“Oo, now, that would have been around nine o’clock, I reckon, sir.”

“Where did you find it?”

“Where us was working.”

“And that was?”

“Oo, about half-way acrorst Benet Enclosure, near enough.”

"What were you doing there?"

The witness looked surprised.

"Why, sir, you knows as well as I do."

"Answer the question, man. All this has to go on record."

"Oo, well, then, us was felling."

"Tell the court how you came to find the body."

"It were there."

"How do you mean?"

"Why, us was felling a Scots pine, do ee see, sir, and dead man, he laid just where tree were liable to fall."

"You mean that the body was lying in the open, where anybody could have seen it?"

"Ar, that be my meaning."

"Don't you realise that you had no right to move it?"

"But it were in the way. Tree trunk woulda made mincemeat of the poor bugger, if that had fell on 'im."

"Please do not comment. Confine yourself to answering my questions."

"I thought as how I were."

"Why did you not go at once for the police or a doctor?"

"Us was too busy, that's for why. Chap was dead all right. Nothing to be done for him, and us had our day's work to think of."

"You are a very stupid man. Didn't you realise that you might get into serious trouble for not reporting a death?"

"Us was gooin' to report it all right, not as it were any business of ourn. Us tossed up to see who ud do the reporting. I lorst, and that's why I be here."

"What happened when Mr. Richardson and Mr. Bradley arrived?"

"Oo, us had just knocked off for a spell when us heard 'em. Fell in the ditch, or summat, they did. So I hollers at 'em, thinking to save meself a job, and one of 'em ketches his foot agin the dead un, so I uncovers un where us laid him in the bracken and axes 'em to report, which I takes it

they did. Very took aback, 'em was when they see the corpus. I noticed that particular."

"I have asked you before not to comment. You have nothing more to tell the court?"

"Noo, sir, I reckon that be all."

"Very well. You may stand down, unless the jury have anything to ask you."

The jury looked at one another, but no one was bold enough to venture a question, so the witness, passing a finger around the inside of his Sunday collar and scratching the side-seam of his Sunday trousers, thankfully abandoned his public position and rejoined the ranks of the anonymous.

"Well, there's one thing," said Denis, when they left the coroner's court, "if the doctors are right about the poisons—and, of course, they *are* right—that lets you out most beautifully, apart from what I said before."

"Does it?" Richardson sounded more than doubtful. "What makes you think so?"

"The poisons themselves, of course. How could *you* get hold of potassium cyanide?"

"Quite easily. You forget I've worked in prep schools. The stinks lab in my last school probably contained enough lethal matter to kill the whole Regiment of Guards."

"But you didn't touch chemistry, did you?"

"No, but that doesn't mean a thing. The stuff was on the premises. Any member of the staff could have got at it. He had only to hook the key to the cupboard."

"*If* he'd known the stuff was there!"

"But we all knew. Young Borgia, who was the lab assistant, was always boasting about the poisons cupboard. He used to take a delight in telling the boys that he could do in the whole school if he wanted to. The science master heard him and complained to the Old Man."

Dame Beatrice intervened.

"It is still to be proved that the school possessed stocks of potassium cyanide *and* of hydrocyanic acid," she said.

"The trouble is that it did," said Richardson, gloomily. "The science bloke ran a photography club and the art chap knew all about engraving."

Denis looked concerned, but Dame Beatrice cackled.

"To employ one master who needed to have access to poisons might be accidental; two, in the same school, looks like carelessness on the part of the Head," she misquoted. Laura grunted. She was always somewhat discountenanced when Dame Beatrice, like the Devil, used scripture (in the most elementary sense of the word) to prove her argument.

"Here," she said, suddenly becoming cheerful again, "New Forest indicates adders. Aren't adder-bites treated with potassium-something-or-other?"

"Indeed, yes. They may be treated by an injection of potassium permanganate solution, but that is not *quite* the same thing as potassium cyanide," Dame Beatrice mildly pointed out.

"No, perhaps not, but can't you see what must have happened? Those two men must have been bitten by adders and some clot gave them the wrong injection as an antidote. I don't believe that either of them was poisoned deliberately."

"A most ingenious theory," Dame Beatrice admitted. "It is medically sound and may well serve as a working hypothesis."

"Golly!" said Laura, overawed, in the Hyman Caplan fashion, by this evidence of her own genius. "Do you really mean it?"

"I do, but there remains the unescapable theory that if both men were bitten by adders and if both, according to your idea, were given treatment which resulted in death, coincidence is overdoing matters."

"But there's nothing wrong with the idea?"

"No, no. It is most ingenious. The inquests are to be resumed three weeks from today. That should give us ample time and scope to free Mr. Richardson's mind of fears and forebodings, and, I hope, to hit upon the truth."

"Thanks," said Richardson gloomily.

"I wonder what you really think?" said Laura, when she and Dame Beatrice were alone and in the car.

"First, that Mr. Richardson is entirely innocent, although I cannot feel that he has been altogether open with me."

"You don't think he moved Colnbrook's body from his tent and then more or less guided Denis to the spot where they found it?"

"The trouble about that theory is that there is a very big question-mark attached to it. If he did move the body, (a task of some magnitude, incidentally, for one person) why should he have taken Denis that way? It would seem a most dangerous as well as a most illogical proceeding."

"Oh, I don't know. Murderers do these queer things."

"What about the second body, that of Mr. Bunt, which the police *did* find in the tent? Do you suggest that Mr. Richardson substituted it for that of Mr. Colnbrook?"

"Well, it *could* be," said Laura, this time doubtfully. "You see, he might have had a motive for doing in Colnbrook, but none for wanting Bunt out of the way."

"Dear, dear, dear!" said Dame Beatrice. "That, of all things connected with this case, surely remains to be seen!"

"All right. I don't mind acting as Aunt Sally. I wonder what the two lads thought about the inquest? Denis was as cool as a cucumber, but there's no doubt that poor old Richardson looked a bit green about the gills."

The two young men had driven in Richardson's little car to the inquest, and they had returned in it to the hotel. Laura and Dame Beatrice joined them in the bar, where there was plenty of time (as Denis pointed out) for a couple of quick ones before lunch, for the inquests had been held in the morning.

As soon as the four were settled at a table in the corner by a large window which overlooked the side of the garden, Denis said,

"For goodness' sake, Aunt dear, put this lunatic out of his misery! He's convinced the police suspect him and he's already arranging to see a solicitor and reserve his defence."

Dame Beatrice bestowed upon Richardson an encouraging leer.

"Upon what do you base your fears, dear child?" she asked.

"Well, it *all* looks so damned bad," replied Richardson. "I can make out a case for the police as easily as though I were the Superintendent himself. They can't *help* but suspect me. I mean, just look at the facts!"

"Let us include in them, then, your own movements on which, for want of a more original expression, we will call the day and night of the crime."

"The day *and* night?" Richardson looked horrified. "How do you mean—the day *and* night?"

"Well, I have had no opportunity to examine the bodies of the deceased," said Dame Beatrice, "but it is to be assumed that the murders—if, indeed murders they were..."

"Person or persons unknown," murmured Denis. "I bet that's what it will be, unless it's brought in as suicide. Personally, I don't think it will be. I suspect the Superintendent of having something up his sleeve."

"Very well," said Dame Beatrice, "those two men were murdered. If that is so, we have to discover, in the classic formula, which person or persons had the means, the motive, and the opportunity to commit these crimes."

"Do we believe that both crimes were committed by the same person or persons?" demanded Denis.

"Of course we do," said Laura. "It would be too much of a coincidence if they were not." She ignored the fact that she herself had invoked the arm of this goddess.

"Two different derivatives of the same lethal substance were used, sweet coz, remember," murmured Denis.

"Yes, I know, but you heard what Tom said about poisons at his school. Why shouldn't science and art both be involved?"

"Shades of Sir Christopher Wren!"

"I don't see why not," said Laura stoutly. "Things are tending that way at the present time. You should read more books."

Dame Beatrice intervened.

"It seems to me," she said, "that the Scylla and District Athletic and Social Club should be subjected to inquisition. Both the deceased were, or had been, members. Surely the solution of the mystery of these deaths might very possibly lie there."

"Isn't that rather too obvious a thought, dear Aunt?" asked Denis.

"Yes, of course it is," his great-aunt agreed. "But, if you remember your Holmes..."

"And also your Wodehouse," said Laura.

"I think it's time for lunch," said Richardson. He seemed none the happier as a result of being present at this session of higher thought. Dame Beatrice cackled.

"Lunch will be on for the next two hours," she said, "and, if you care to approach the bar counter, you will be allowed to consume (free of charge, which, as a housekeeper, I find regrettable) potato crisps, olives, cheese biscuits, and frazzled bacon rinds. These should help to stave off the pangs of hunger for a while."

"Atta-baby!" said Laura, rising from her chair. "He isn't the only one who feels like a starving python."

"In that case," said Dame Beatrice, "perhaps we had better go in to lunch."

When lunch was over, she suggested that she and Richardson should go for a run in her car while Laura and Denis followed their own devices. George was to drive his



employer and the distressed young man, so that, seated together in the Jaguar, they could talk undisturbed. The route was left to George.

"What do you want to know?" asked Richardson, when, having taken the road across a vast expanse of open pasture on which grazed ponies and cattle, the car turned across a bridge and entered magnificent woodland.

"I want to know exactly—and, please realise that I mean what I say—*exactly* how you spent your time on the day which culminated in your discovery of Mr. Colnbrook's body in your tent and your subsequent report to the police."

"Well, that's easy enough. When you're on your own you remember things ever so much better than when you're one of a party. Let's see, now. Yes."

"Begin with breakfast," said Dame Beatrice.

"Breakfast, yes. I got in to breakfast at the hotel at about nine o'clock. Is that near enough?"

"If it is as near as you can get."

"Yes, well, it would have been just about then, because, you see, I had gone for a walk after I'd had a plunge in the stream. I don't know how far I went, but it would have been about seven miles, I think."

"Two hours' walking, then?"

"About that, I suppose. I stepped it out because, at that time in the morning, at this time of year, it's chilly."

"Yes. And after breakfast?"

"I did what seems a silly thing now, but I didn't know at the time that I'd be asked to account for my actions. I went by train to New Milton and walked from there to a village where there's an interesting old manor house."

"That sounds innocent enough."

"Absolutely. The trouble is that I can't think of anybody who'll swear to my having been there."

"I see. And then?"

"The manor house has been converted into flats, so I left and went to Milford-on-Sea, where I had lunch at an

hotel.”

“Excellent. The waiter will be able to identify you.”

“Then I had a swim—very cold, of course!—and then I went into Lymington and bought some socks at one shop and some Wellington boots at another.”

“Better and better! So what is worrying you, Mr. Richardson?”

“I don’t really know. I feel as though I’m in a trap. I know the Superintendent suspects me.”

“He probably suspects the members of the Scylla and District club a good deal more strongly, let alone the relatives of the deceased. What did you do after you left Lymington?”

“Nothing much. I caught a bus to the level crossing in this village and walked back to the hotel. There I had dinner, as usual—”

“As usual?”

“Well, by that, I mean I’d dined there on the Thursday and Friday. This was the Saturday, when I’d been expecting Denis to show up, but, of course, I knew he wouldn’t, because of the postcard I’d had.”

“Postcard? Ah, yes. You walked into the village and collected it on the Friday morning, I believe. Why did you not have your correspondence addressed to the hotel?”

“Well, it seemed rather cheek, as I wasn’t sleeping there.”

“Dear me! I had no idea that the rising generation entertained such scruples.”

“Everything was to be sent to the hotel once we were in residence, of course—that’s to say, from last Saturday onwards. I didn’t know, when I made the arrangement, that Denis couldn’t come that week-end.”

“Quite. To how many people did you give the *poste restante* address?”

“To Denis himself, to my mother, and to the people whose kid I’d been tutoring.”

"I see. To nobody else?"

"Nobody—but I did tell the Maidstons—my last employers, you know—that I was camping up on the heath."

"You came to the New Forest last Thursday morning and pitched your tent. At what time?"

"Oh, a quarter to ten, near enough."

"You left it, on Thursday, for how long?"

"I went back to the hotel at about twelve and got back to camp at about a quarter-past two, I think. I didn't stay in the tent. I bathed and then I explored a bit, and went back to the hotel for tea. I left again at about ten minutes to five, walked a few miles, got to the hotel for a latish dinner, and then went back to camp to sleep."

"It seems to me that anybody who was watching your movements might have had some chance to formulate a plan of action. The most likely person to have done so would have been a member of the hotel staff, don't you think?"

"Hopelessly *unlikely*, I would have said."

Dame Beatrice nodded approval. Then she said, "All the same, I suppose some members of the staff have their free day on a Thursday? What about your Friday?"

"Well, Friday was quite a bit different. I had breakfast at the hotel at about a quarter to nine, and then I walked into the village, collected Denis's postcard, bought cigarettes, fruit, and some sweets, got back to the hotel in time for a drink before lunch and then, after lunch, I walked over the common and photographed some ponies and cattle and a couple of donkeys, I think. I suppose again I walked about seven miles altogether."

"Another two hours, I imagine, so that you would have been away from your tent for, roughly, what length of time?"

"Roughly, for about three and a half hours plus an hour for lunch, plus the two hours' walking you've just mentioned."

"In other words, once you had left your camp in the morning, you did not return to it for at least six to seven hours."

"I suppose that's about right. At about a quarter to five I met a forester, not far from my camp, who showed me a badger's hole in the woods and I made up my mind to do a bit of badger-watching that night after dinner. So I did, but I had no luck with the badgers and got back to camp at about half-past eleven or so."

"So your tent was again empty from—?"

"I don't know exactly. I cut out tea in favour of the walk and the forester, but, after dinner, that's to say, at about a quarter to eight, I went back to camp for a sweater and a torch, and so on."

"And you saw nobody near your tent?"

"Not a soul. Of course, it was pretty dark then. All the way through, you see, there's very little proof that I spent my time in the way I say I did."

"Oh, nonsense!" said Dame Beatrice cheerfully. "You'd be surprised how many people observe what others do and where they go. The world is populated quite largely by Peeping Toms. Oh, *your* name is Tom! Dear, dear!"

"Do you think the Superintendent will charge me?"

"I think nothing is more unlikely. What do you *know* about hydrocyanic acid, apart from what was said at the inquest?"

"Wasn't it supplied to secret agents during the war in case they were afraid of being forced to give away information to the Nazis?"

"Anything else?"

"I did mention the stinks cupboard at Tuna House School."

"I must have a word with the Headmaster."

"Oily old brute!"

"That sounds as though his manners are above the average. But we appear to have arrived at an unique

village.”

George pulled up.

“You named no particular destination, madam,” he said, “and Mrs. Gavin and Mr. Denis were particularly anxious to visit Buckler’s Hard. Shall I see whether I can obtain permission from the car-park attendant to take the car down the slope, madam?”

“No, no. We must not attempt to suborn an official who is on duty. Besides, I prefer to tour outlandish places on foot. One sees far more that way.”

“I don’t know that the inhabitants would care to hear their village called outlandish, madam,” said George, with a respectful smile.

“But it *is* outlandish, in the very best sense of the word, George. You will observe that there is a vast expanse of *water* at the foot of the hill. How very fortunate we are to have struck a fine day for this excursion! Now Mrs. Gavin will be able to show me a catamaran, I hope. She talks freely of twin hulls. You may meet us at Beaulieu, but I cannot say when. I believe we can walk to the abbey alongside the water. I see that Mrs. Gavin and my grand-nephew have followed us here.”

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## Buckler's Hard

*When will the stream be weary of flowing  
Under my eye?  
When will the wind be weary of blowing  
Over the sky?  
When will the clouds be weary of fleeting?  
When will the heart be weary of beating?  
And nature die?*

Alfred, Lord Tennyson

Once the party had left the two cars, Dame Beatrice annexed Laura, leaving the two young men free to wander together down the rough, steep road to the quay. The boys strolled on beside the water, but Dame Beatrice and Laura loitered. The sunshine, for that time of year, was particularly brilliant and there was more blue than cloud in the sky.

Although it was fairly late in the season, a great many craft were still in commission and the scene was gay and pleasing. The Beaulieu River at this point was a quarter of a mile wide, with a deepish channel at the quay. The river here made a magnificent bend, and there were shallows by the opposite bank.

Two catamarans, the double hulls referred to by Dame Beatrice, were drawn well up on the quay-side and she and Laura stopped to examine them.

"I do not think I care about them, so far as looks are concerned," commented Dame Beatrice. "What are their particular assets, that you favour them so highly?"

"To quote the book of words, they tack very fast, they're a safe, manoeuvrable sort of craft—you can even lift one hull completely out of the water and still keep going—and they are particularly sensitive to the helmsman. I rather agree with you about their looks, but I suppose they stem from the outrigger canoes that South Sea Islanders use."

"Yes, I see."

"They take sail, of course—quite a tall spread if you want to go really fast—and the masts are mostly of metal, the International type if you want a flyer. But, look here, Mrs. Croc., you didn't segregate me from the opposite sex just to talk about catamarans. Did you get anything interesting or important from young Tom Richardson during the car ride?"

"I obtained a detailed account of how he spent his time down here before Denis joined him."

"Any good?"

"I have not made up my mind. It appears to me that there was a good deal of time, when he was absent from his tent, in which ill-disposed persons could have..."

"Wished the bodies on him?"

"Exactly."

"But who would want to?"

"By that, I infer that you are asking whether Mr. Richardson has enemies."

"Well, yes, there's that, because I can't quite see the point of putting the bodies, one after the other, in his tent, unless there was some ill-feeling towards him. It would have been much simpler to have dumped them in the woods, the way Richardson and Denis found the second body, which was really, I suppose, the first body—or would you put it third?"

"Let us call it the first body, as Mr. Richardson found it first."

"Less confusing that way, I agree. Incidentally, am I wrong, or did I go to sleep or something at the inquest?"

"To the best of my knowledge and belief, you did *not* go to sleep at the inquest. And now, to what do we refer?"

"I'll give you three guesses," said Laura, grinning. "I say, this is a jolly sort of place, isn't it? Look at that cruiser!"

Dame Beatrice looked at it. Then she said that from what she had gathered of Laura's previous remarks, she would hazard a first guess that her secretary might have noted that there had been nothing in the medical evidence to indicate which of the victims had died first.

"Well!" exclaimed Laura. "You are, in good sooth, a mind-reader, Mrs. Croc., dear!"

"It is part of my profession, of course," Dame Beatrice modestly pointed out.

"Think there is anything significant about the times of the deaths not being disclosed?"

"It is more than possible, but do you not think that both men may have died at approximately the same time?"

"It seemed to me that the Superintendent was wriggling his toes inside his boots, all the same."

"You postulate?"

"Like the dickens I do. He was on pins in case anything, however trivial, was going to be given away. After all, doctors (present company excepted, of course!) are a stiff-necked gaggle and don't appreciate having their tails docked. Pun deliberate, intentional and, I thought, rather good. What do *you* think?"

"That the use of the word 'gaggle' did not sustain your metaphor, suggesting, as it does, the presence of geese and not of dogs—or *do* they dock the tails of *Anser Aibifrons*, *Anser Brachyrhynchus*, and others of their ilk?"

"You win," said Laura. "Glad I didn't bet on my chances. Honestly, though, don't you see that it makes a difference



whether one of them *was* killed first? Of course it does!  
Gang warfare!”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Simple enough. Gang A do in Citizen B, so Gang B take it out on Citizen A.”

“Gang warfare is seldom so tidy or so restrained.”

“We’ve never had a gang warfare case,” said Laura, keeping to her point.

“For which we may be devoutly thankful. Gang warfare, as I understand it, is nasty, brutish, and without even the advantage of being short, the last being unlike life, which is said to wear the tarnished halo of extreme brevity. We seem to have lost sight of our escorts, by the way.”

“They’re round the bend—literally, I mean, not figuratively. Do you want us to step it out and catch them up?”

“No, no. I am finding our *tete-a-tete* both interesting and profitable. There is one commission over which I shall need assistance of a specialised kind, if we are indeed to undertake this enquiry. What do you really feel about our entangling ourselves?”

“We can’t back out *now*! Young Tom would die of fright. After all, he *may* be in a dangerous position. We don’t *really* know what the police think about his connection with these deaths and, even if they don’t hold him responsible, they’ll keep badgering him with questions to see whether he alters his story, and if they do badger him, and if he can’t count on our support and sympathy, the highly-strung lad is apt to go up the wall.”

“Yes,” agreed Dame Beatrice, “but you must not allow your maternal instincts to cloud your judgment, you know.”

Laura almost choked. Dame Beatrice cackled and called her attention to a yacht which was passing.

“Sloop, Bermuda rigged,” said Laura, stopping to watch and appraise it. “Saw one rather like it at the Boat Show.

Coasts and estuaries. Costs about five hundred and fifty. The sails come about fifty pounds extra."

"I do not understand why sails should be listed as an extra if the craft cannot get under way without them," observed Dame Beatrice.

"Well, you see—now, there's a nice job!" A four-berth motor-cum-sailing boat was approaching them round the long, handsome sweep of the broad river. "Draws about three and a half feet of water. Over three hundred feet of sail and, if you're in a hurry, or the wind's wrong, there's an eighteen-horsepower motor to get you out of trouble," said Laura. "A lazy owner's delight, in fact, I call her, but a sweet little craft, all the same. You can go to sea in *her!*"

"Delightful. How well can Hamish swim now?"

"Oh, he's the usual modern water-baby—perfectly safe under any circumstances except extreme cold or a bevy of hungry sharks."

"Then we had better purchase a handy boat and spend time on the water next summer. It would be convenient enough to come here from the Stone House and I find this place attractive. Then, of course, there is the Hamble River..."

"Both very crowded in the summer. Why don't we go up to Plockton on Loch Carron in Wester Ross? Scenery marvellous, harbour good, and free from strong tides, artists' paradise, and yachtsman's dream (I quote). It's on the railway, if you don't want to take the car, and we could get to Skye or into Loch Torridon or up to Gairloch..."

"I like the sound of that, too. Go ahead, my dear Laura, and make your plans."

"We could always come here again at this time of year, or even a bit later. But I must point out, Mrs. Croc., dear, that we're now losing sight of our *raison d'être*."

"I do not feel that Mr. Richardson and his mirages are my *raison d'être*, child."

"Good Lord! You don't mean you think Tom was *seeing things*, and the corpses weren't in his tent at all? Oh, but we know that one of them was, because the Superintendent saw it there. So—why mirages?"

"Say, then, the figments of a guilty mind, child."

"You don't really think Tom Richardson has a guilty mind?"

"We all have guilty minds, my dear Laura."

"You don't fob me off like that! Jolly well come clean!"

"I think there is more behind Mr. Richardson's present reactions than we know."

"You mean he's mixed up in something fishy?"

"I think he knows more about the late Mr. Colnbrook than he has admitted."

This part of the conversation was on similar lines to that which was being carried on between the two young men. These, taking but the most cursory interest in the yachts, cruisers, launches, catamarans, dinghies, and boatmen's supply boats which were out on the river, were strolling towards Beaulieu, deep in conversation punctuated by pauses for earnest thought.

Just as Laura was asking whether Dame Beatrice believed that Richardson was mixed up with something illegal, Denis, with the disconcerting directness of the artist, suddenly said to his friend,

"You'll have to come clean with Aunt Adela, you know, if you want her in your team. I told you so before."

Richardson did not attempt to side-step the significance of this piece of advice. He said, with sober fatality,

"I know. I talked to her quite a lot coming down here in her car, but it was a question of giving her the information she asked for, rather than putting my oar in and volunteering possibly unnecessary facts, you see."

"What facts?"

"Such as that I actually met Colnbrook—to speak to him, I mean—more than once. I do know a bit more about

him than I've ever told anybody. I could have had a motive for killing him, now that I'm engaged to be married."

"Good Lord! You don't mean he was in a position to blackmail you? What *have* you been a-doing of?"

"Look here, I don't want it to get to the police that I know more about him than I've told them. All the same, (and keep this under your hat until I've decided what to do) except that I admitted I'd met him and had run against him in the cross-country challenge, you may as well face it that I've told them damn-all, and that's how it's going to stay."

"Leave out the damn, man, and tell Aunt Adela the all. She won't let you down. I can vouch for her. You'd better seek her out in the drawing-room lounge tonight. You're pretty certain to get it to yourselves after dinner because everybody either looks in on the television or props up the bar. Talk to her like an erring but favourite grandson. Lay bare your youthful bosom. You *must* give her something to go on, you know. She can't be expected to start from scratch and *still* steer your colours past the winning post."

"Do jockeys start from scratch?" asked Richardson, looking more cheerful. "I thought they were handicapped by weights."

"All right, all right! She can't be expected to carry unfair and extra weight because she lacks the salient facts of your case. Be reasonable."

"Yes, of course. Yes, I agree. All right, then. You *do* think I'm in a bit of a jam, though, don't you?" "I still think you exaggerate the dangers, but I also still think it's better to be safe than sorry, therefore Aunt Adela is the answer, and I think you ought to tell her everything you know. Let's halt here awhile and let her and Laura catch up with us."

"Who *is* this Mrs. Gavin?"

"She's by way of being my great-aunt's secretary, but she is also a person in her own right."

"Meaning?"

"A grand girl, our Laura. Anyway, you come clean and you'll never look back with either of them."

"All right, then, let's stop and look at boats."

"I suppose you *didn't* know the party of the second part?"

"The how-much?"

"The specimen who was in your tent when you went back there with the police. That there Bunt."

"Never seen him in my life before and that's the gospel truth. I suppose he was the second runner on the heath, that's all."

"Then what the devil are you worrying about? Suppose you *do* know something more about Colnbrook! What's it matter?"

"I've been framed. Somebody must have it in for me. That's the conclusion I've come to."

"Well, think! Who's likely to frame you? When you've settled that to your satisfaction, just give Aunt Adela his name and address and, unless I'm vastly mistaken, Bob's your uncle."

"Do you really think so?"

"Of course I do, you idiot! Put your faith in the Bradleys. They *can't* fail!"

"Well, if you say so," said Richardson, but his optimism had faded again and he spoke despondently. They were traversing Keeping's Copse. Denis deliberately slowed, and then stopped.

"So you have thought better of it, Mr. Richardson," said Dame Beatrice, as disconcerting in her own fashion as her grand-nephew was in his. "You are prepared to make shocking disclosures. I shall be very glad to hear them. Shall we make what, in modern parlance, I am informed, is called a date?"

"Well," stammered Richardson, taken aback by this display of omniscience and conscious also of Denis's

triumphant yet tolerant smile. "It's very good of you. Perhaps there are one or two things..."

"Of course there are. It would be extraordinary and inhuman if people told the *whole* truth at once. It might even be very dangerous. Let us now drop the subject and concentrate our thoughts on Beaulieu Abbey. What are your opinions on jazz, trad, twist, squares, cats, and those delinquents who follow Siva the Destroyer without knowledge of the obverse of his medal—if, indeed, a metaphor in this connection be not entirely out of place?"

"The Preserver," said Denis. "Well, the refectory at Beaulieu seems to have been preserved, and something of the cloisters and a few extra bits of wall."

"Three arches of the Chapter House, too," said Laura, "and, of course, there's always the collection of lizzies."

"Lizzies?"

"Vintage cars, dear."

"Oh," said Richardson, "vintage cars. I see. Very interesting, I should think."

"For good measure, the cloisters are haunted," pursued Laura. "Come on. Let's step it out. I want something to eat. Looking at people on boats always makes me feel hungry. You, Tom, had better walk with me, so that Dame B. and Denis can get together for a bit. They're by way of being buddies. Besides, you can confide your troubles to me as we go. I know Denis. Always sees the bright side. So fatiguing. Now you just tell me the worst, and I'll be as lugubrious as you like. Rely on me *not* to point out the silver lining."

"I say, that's just what I want! How did you know?"

"Oh, Dame B. isn't the only psychologist among those present," said Laura, waving a shapely hand. "Now, then, fire away. Why are you all of a tremble about these deaths? You didn't bring them about...or did you? Speak slowly, distinctly, and to the point. Did the *vendetta* begin at the cross-country rally, or do we seek to re-enter the womb of Time?"

Richardson did not answer until they had covered another couple of hundred yards. Then he turned his head and observed that Dame Beatrice and her great-nephew had halted to watch a sea-going cruiser which was making its way down-stream. He said,

“Well, it’s a silly sort of story really.”

“So is *Alice in Wonderland*, if you care to think about it in that sort of way.”

“Well,” said Richardson, relieved and encouraged by this surprising analogy, “I suppose it began when I, as secretary of our lot, accepted their lot’s challenge.”

“Did they want preferential treatment in some way?”

“No, no, far from it. They invited us over to their ground—we haven’t a ground of our own, as, no doubt, you know—to see them in action and fix up the final details of the cross-country run.”

“To see them in action? Was that necessary?”

“I shouldn’t have thought so. Anyway, our president, our treasurer, and a chap named Evans came with me. Evans is our best long-distance man—a marathon runner, actually—and we stayed to tea. They have women members, so the tea was a good one. The girls’ mums turned up and put on no end of a spread. There was only one jarring note.”

“A-ha! So here we come!”

“Well, it’s where we went, actually. When tea was over there was a concerted move to the local. I had a bit of time to spare before I caught my train. I hadn’t brought the car because it was in dry dock having the brakes adjusted and being given a general ‘once-over’ at the garage, so I saw the other three off in Evans’s Morris and strolled along to find a pub. I didn’t know which one was favoured by the local lads and it was quite by chance that I happened on one which was enjoying the custom of Colnbrook and a couple of girls. He had dodged the column, it seemed, to sport with Amaryllis and there was a lot of giggling and a spot of slap

and tickle going on under the benevolent eye of the barman. As it was not much past six, the bar was empty except for the above-mentioned and a couple of old fellows smoking pipes and getting outside a pint each in a far corner, so in I barged.

“Colnbrook spotted me as soon as I went in and bellowed to me to join the party and asked me what I’d have. I didn’t want to join him and his doxies, but one has to do the civil thing, especially in pubs, where people are apt to take offence rather easily, so I went over. Colnbrook bought me a drink, and I bought him and the girls one, and then I said I had to be going. To my horror, one of the females elected to accompany me to the station and see me off.

“When we got outside, she confided to me that she liked me and that, anyhow, the other two wouldn’t mind being left alone for a bit. When we got to the station, the wretched wench insisted upon coming on to the platform and she led me into the waiting-room. It was empty and she immediately indicated that she thought it an ideal spot for a bit of necking. I was just fobbing her off—physically, I may add—she was their woman shot-putt champion—when who should arrive but Colnbrook and his girlfriend. They stated their opinion that I was endeavouring to compromise this ghastly female weight-lifter, and Colnbrook, his silly map one enormous grin, indicated that he should inform the other members of my club. *They’d* have laughed their heads off, but if my fiancée had got to know...”

“Tell Mrs. Croc. all about it,” said Laura. “Personally, your girl would be a perfect little chump, / think, to swallow a word of such a story, and I don’t believe she would. If she does, be a man and chuck her.”

“You see,” said Richardson, ignoring this Spartan solution, “although there’s an understanding and so forth, we’re not yet actually engaged and my position with her is a



bit in jeopardy because I've twice stood her up in order to run."

"I see. And you don't think she would take your word for the waiting-room episode?"

"I don't really know, but I certainly wouldn't want to chance it."

"Well, be that as it may, how was the episode concluded?"

"That's just my trouble. Having fended off the female strong-arm, I threatened Colnbrook that if he breathed a word I'd do for him. At that he turned ugly and said, 'You and who else?' Fortunately my train came in just then and I had to catch it, pursued by what the novelists call mocking laughter. Well, I didn't give the whole thing much more thought until these deaths took place. I've got wind up properly now, though, because, you see, those two dreadful girls both heard me threaten him."

"But you didn't threaten Bunt, chump! And, if there's one thing more certain than another, it is that those deaths are connected."

"You haven't heard the worst of it," said Richardson. He hesitated for a moment and then burst out, "I haven't told anybody but Denis this, but the first day I was down here I saw both of them together. They were in running kit and jogging over the heath and on to the common. They had field-glasses and were planning a route or something."

"So what?"

"So I knew they were in the neighbourhood. So, if I killed Colnbrook, I'd have had to kill Bunt to shut his mouth. Don't you see? The Superintendent will!"

## Interlude

*Women indeed are bitter bad Judges in these cases.*

*The Beggar's Opera*  
John Gay

*Murder is as fashionable a Crime as a Man can be guilty of.*

*Ibid*

It was Ladies' Training and Practice Night on the ground and the cinder track of the Scylla and District Social and Athletic Club. Aileen Crumb and Doreen Dodd, their frequent differences forgiven but not forgotten, were practising starts, assisted (or not) by the blistering comments of the club coach. Corinna May and Dulcie Cobham had put up a couple of hurdles on the opposite side of the track and were doing their exercises, sometimes by leaning on a hurdle and putting a knee on it, sometimes by taking a stylish couple of flights and sometimes by sitting on the ground and performing the heathenish contortions necessary to the perfecting of their art.

Keeping well away from all four or, (counting the coach), all five of the above, were a couple of distance runners named Judy and Syl. These were jogging round the track on the two inside lanes, deep in conversation.

"I can't help saying it," observed Judy. "Why two of them? It makes you think a bit. Somebody got it in for the club. Hope they stop at the men. It makes me nervous."

"You can't count old Bobo Bunt. He resigned from the club a long time ago."

"Got thrown out, you mean."

"Now then, dear, no nasturtiums!"

"Well, he did get thrown out, too. Don't you remember...?"

"What about Bert and Carrie, then? You know, I reckon that was what touched everything off! Don't you remember that row in the station waiting-room?"

"We only heard Bert's side of it, remember. I must say I thought that posh Oxford boy was all right, and, of course, Penny the Putt would do anything for a laugh."

"I know all about that, but there *was* something funny going on, else Bert wouldn't have got croaked. Personally, I don't believe it was murder. I reckon he done it himself, Oxford boy or no Oxford boy."

"What makes you say that?"

"I reckon Bert suffered from remorse."

"What about? Anyway, Bert wouldn't feel remorse. He was the dirtiest runner in the club. Only wish I had his technique."

"What, crowding people on bends and using his elbows and his spikes and pushing people on the grass?"

"Well, he usually won, didn't he?"

"Oh, go on with you, Judy! That ain't what they learned you at school."

"Oh, school! Still, I got me basic there, even if they made me be a sprinter and not a distance."

"Well, the longest race at school was the two-twenty, and it put some pace on you, didn't it? Look at Adrian Metcalfe and that there Brightwell boy."

"Wish I could—close to. Oh, Syl, what a Greek god!"

"A how-much?"

"They learnt us about them at school. We went to the British Museum."

"So did we. Bloomin' rude, I thought them statues. Ever so interesting, though, I'm bound to admit. Anyway, Bert and Bobo wasn't any Greek gods, dressed or undressed, *I'll* bet."

"But what makes you say Bert croaked himself? It don't make sense."

"Why not?"

"He'd think the club would go to pot without him."

"That's true enough, too, I suppose."

"Of course it's true. So he didn't do *himself*. He was *done*."

"By the Oxford boy?"

"Well, there *was* that row in the station."

"Yes, but there's only Carrie's word to go on, and you know what *she* is. What I say, you never *can* trust long-jumpers, not even young Mavis, *or* Deirdre Bath."

"No, it don't seem fair they get so many attempts, considering we only get the one."

"Besides, it depends on the take-off judge. Some of 'em lacks their eyesight and some of 'em's biased in favour."

"Still, Carrie done nineteen six."

"Yes, with the wind behind her and her new boyfriend doing the measuring."

They jogged on.

"That row in the station," said Syl, at the end of another lap. "Think it was a put-up job?"

"Of course it was. That Oxford boy wouldn't have made a pass in a nudist camp."

"Oh, but men don't, dear. One of the rules."

"Well, you know what I mean. That Oxford boy, let Carrie say what she likes, he was framed. That idea's just come to me. He was framed!"

"As how and for what?"

"Everybody thinks these Oxford students got money. Course they haven't, poor little B's."

"But he wasn't still a student. He'd left."

"It's the same thing, dear. Without an uncle, or something, they leaves to be schoolmasters or something, and there's no money in schoolmastering. What about a couple of starts to the first bend? You start me and I'll start you. Don't suppose Dad will worry about anything but the sprinters. Not that he's a bad sort, mind you. He just don't agree with we girls doing the mile."

"If I could win at anything else, he'd be dead right at that," said Syl. They held the sprinters up while they practised starting and then trotted off to the dressing-rooms.

"I still don't get it how we got this ground and the showers and things," said Judy. "I thought the club was always on the rocks."

"It's some Trust or other, dear."

"Oh, I see. Fishy, these Trusts, I always think. Somebody trying to dodge the Income Tax, that's all there is to it."

"I suppose," said Syl, "there couldn't be anything like *that* behind it?"

"Behind what?—Damn this shower! It won't turn off! Ah, that's it!—How d'you mean?"

"Well, Bert and Bobo finding out something fishy and being bumped off before they could use what they knowed, so as to try and bleed this boy."

"Oh, don't be romantic!"

"Still, they might have done."

"What, enough to get themselves done in?"

"Well, you never know. Mum said you can come to supper, if you like. It's rissoles and chips."

"Ta, then, I will. I'm supposed to be meeting Ted at nine o'clock, though. Think your mum will mind if I push off then?"

"Course not. One thing I'll say for mum, she does understand the problems of we girls. She says herself that, these days, if you ain't married by nineteen, you've had it."

The supper at Syl's house was dominated by her mother, in the tradition that young women ballet dancers, swimmers, ice-skaters, and other athletes are all dominated, protected, and have life made hell for them, by the female parent. To Syl's plea that potato chips automatically put her out of training, her mother replied that a bit of building up did not hurt nobody and that the family could soon sweat *that* off by *running* to work instead of going by bus. The girls enjoyed the rissoles and chips, and nobody mentioned blackmail.

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## The Gen, the Dope, the Low-Down

*By these Questions something seems to have  
ruffled you. Are any of us suspected?*

*The Beggar's Opera*  
John Gay

The available information regarding the two deaths was too meagre to interest the London papers overmuch. Most of them carried a few lines headed *Mysterious Deaths In New Forest*, but the adjourned inquest, the adamant attitude of the manager of the New Forest Hunt Hotel, and the uncompromising stand taken by the Superintendent of Police made further enquiries difficult. The London papers were prepared to wait for the inquest to be resumed before they spent any more money on reporters' expenses.

The local press was more persistent, but came up against the same blank walls. One enterprising youth did attempt to waylay Richardson and Denis, but got no change out of either. Richardson offered to punch him on the nose and Denis referred obliquely to a charge of molestation of witnesses.

Dame Beatrice and Laura pursued a course of action dictated by the former and warmly endorsed by the latter. This was to visit the secretary of the Scylla and District Social and Athletic Club to find out whether he had any

contribution to make to the limited information they already possessed regarding the two dead men.

"I bet he won't be over-pleased to see us," volunteered Laura. "The police will have turned him inside-out already, not to mention the local papers."

"I am not so sure," said Dame Beatrice. "An obscure group such as this athletics club may not be at all averse to as much publicity as it can obtain. One thing which I shall do before we dabble in the affair, however, is to acquaint the Chief Constable of our proposed activities. He is an old and valued friend and I should not like him to think that..."

"We were going behind his back? He wouldn't think that of you, I'm certain, but we might as well have his blessing."

This was readily obtained, especially as Dame Beatrice reminded him that her grand-nephew was, to some extent, mixed up in the affair. He introduced her to the Superintendent and she agreed, as was her invariable practice, to keep the police fully informed of any progress she might make in the unmasking of the guilty persons.

"Because, of course, there's almost certain to be more than one of them," said the Superintendent, "and that's why, although we're checking up very carefully on this young Mr. Richardson, ma'am, we're not particularly inclined at present to think he had much to do with it. Nobody seems to have been associated with him until Mr. Bradley came down here, and by that time the murders belonged, as they say, to history. Of course," he added, giving her a shrewd glance, "we've already got in touch with London to check on Mr. Bradley's movements just before he left there, but that's just routine."

Richardson had the address in Southampton of the secretary of the Scylla and District, and an interview, fixed for seven o'clock in the evening, was soon arranged. Dame Beatrice's opinion was justified, for the secretary, a long, thin, dark-haired young man in glasses, greeted them with



nervous enthusiasm, invited them in, and began an excited monologue.

"Of course, we've seen quite a lot of the police and we've had the reporters. All the members of the club, men and girls, have been questioned, but I don't think anyone believes it's got anything to do with the club as such," he said. "Mind you, it's a bit odd that they both belonged to our mob, although, of course, Bunt gave us up months ago because of disagreements over one thing and another."

"Can you tell us the origin of those disagreements?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"Our late president, one of the wealthiest men in the county, started us off with our own ground and a small stand, you know, but he resigned about a year ago, so we touted round for somebody else with money who'd be prepared to support us. Well, there didn't seem to be any outside takers, so Bunt proposed we should ballot among the members themselves. Anybody who was prepared to cough up a hundred quid could join the list of candidates. He himself, he said, was ready and willing. His father's a builder and doing well."

"But I take it that Mr. Bunt was not elected."

"No, he wasn't. Nobody really wanted him. He was our best cross-country runner and a useful steeplechaser—had been tried for the County and all that—but he had it up the nose and was always chucking his weight about. Then one of the ladies—he pulled in a pretty good pay packet I should think, although we never found out what he did—anyhow, he was always treating the girls—found out that his first action as president would be to try and affiliate us to a big Southampton club. Affiliation *sounds* all right, but some of us knew that it meant, in this case, a complete merger in which we'd lose our identity once and for all. A lot of us didn't want that, especially as we've got our own ground and running-track."

"But surely there are the other officers and a committee to vet the president's ideas?" said Laura.

"Well, you see, Mrs. Gavin, he got a certain amount of support from the newer members. Apart from that, as we were founded on the late president's money, we had, as part of our constitution, an agreement that the president's word should be law. That was quite all right in Towne's time, because he never interfered in any way, but we decided it might not be all right if he had a successor. The president was in a position, actually, to determine all questions of policy. Well, to affiliate us to a larger, richer club was definitely a question of policy and we couldn't get round it without altering the rules, and that's always a dicey proceeding."

"I should have thought it was the obvious thing to do," said Laura. The secretary shook his head, took off his glasses, wiped them, and then shook his head again.

"As a matter of fact, if we alter the rules we forfeit the bit of money we still get from a kind of trust-fund. Nobody wants that. It comes in very handy for paying the groundsman and renewing the equipment such as hurdles and high-jump stands and having the track properly looked after, you see."

"I see. So, as he was not elected president, Mr. Bunt left your club?"

"Well, there was a bit of a row, but, in the end, we were jolly lucky, as it happened. We were able to put up another candidate."

"Really?"

"Yes, an old girl named Calne, a retired schoolteacher. Some of us who'd been in her class went and lobbied her, and she agreed to put up the hundred pounds and did so, there and then. She suited everybody, because we knew she wouldn't interfere with a thing and wouldn't attempt to go over the heads of the committee."

"Retired teachers can't usually afford to hand over a hundred smackers for, you might say, nothing," said Laura. "I wonder what made her agree to take on the job?"

"Oh, well, as to that," said the secretary, with a secretive smile, "she'll be paid back, with a bit of interest, you see, although she doesn't know that. We're running dances and bingo in the winter in aid of club funds. There's nothing in the rules to say how club funds are to be used, so we're planning to hand over to her any profit we make. Anyway, it was very sporting of her to put up the money."

"But it left Mr. Bunt somewhat disgruntled," observed Dame Beatrice.

"He was so offensive that we bunged him out, in fact."

"Would you mind very much if I went to see Miss Calne?" asked Dame Beatrice. "You say that she is a retired schoolmistress and I have found such people to be storehouses of the kind of facts which will be of use to me."

"Go and see her, by all means. She attends all our meetings and can certainly give you the low-down on any of us who were in her class at any time! I'll give you her address."

Miss Calne lived between Lyndhurst and Lymington in a small bungalow whose back garden met the grounds of a much larger establishment from which it was screened by trees. Her small garage and large front windows faced on to a broad stretch of common.

"Well!" said Laura. "As the crow flies, or, in this part of the world, as the ponies wander, this can't be all that far from the New Forest Hunt Hotel."

She was right. Miss Calne, a well-covered, pink-cheeked, cheerful woman in her late sixties, knew the hotel and occasionally took lunch or dinner there.

"Lunch in the winter; dinner in the summer," she told Dame Beatrice. "I have only a midday snack in the summer, you see, so I can do with a main meal at night, but in winter

I don't care to come back to an empty house after dark, so, if I do go to the hotel, it is for lunch."

About the members of the Scylla and District Club she was the mine of information for which Dame Beatrice had hoped.

"Yes, I think I did come to the rescue," she said complacently. "I wish it could have been a club for delinquents but, although there is a somewhat rowdy element among the younger members, we get very little really bad behaviour."

"Yet two of your former pupils have contrived to get themselves killed," Dame Beatrice pointed out.

"No. no," said Miss Calne vigorously. "*Not* my pupils, I am thankful to say. Neither of them. Oh, no. I wouldn't like you to run away with that idea. Club members, yes. Old Boys of my school, certainly not." She waved her hand. "I sincerely hope my school turned out better specimens than Bunt and Colnbrook. Bunt was most offensive to me when he knew of my election. He came round here and was insolent."

"Was there—were the two men friends?"

"I really have no idea. You must remember that I had no connection with the club until after Bunt's resignation—so-called."

"We heard about that. He wanted the Scylla Club to affiliate to a larger body based on Southampton, it seems."

"So I was told when I was invited to become president. Oh, something occurs to me. Colnbrook and Bunt were rivals, so I heard. I had forgotten the gossip."

"In running, or did their rivalry stem from a different cause?" Dame Beatrice enquired.

"The cause, I understand, was Mavis Wight."

"Rivalry in love, you mean?"

"I doubt whether some members of the club would understand the meaning of the word love, but I am told that

both wanted to—what is that disagreeable modern expression...?”

“Wanted to date her?” suggested Laura. Miss Calne nodded.

“That’s it.”

“And to which did the young woman give preference?” asked Dame Beatrice.

“I could not say. Deirdre Bath, who used to be one of my pupils, was my informant, but I was not particularly interested and the subject was soon changed.”

“Is this Miss Bath a member of the club?”

“*Mrs.* Bath. She married the treasurer, but, yes, she is still an active member. She jumps.”

“Indeed?” Dame Beatrice looked puzzled.

“Long or high?” demanded Laura, coming to the aid of her employer.

“Oh, long, long. I am told she stands a chance of being selected for the County. She is one of the reasons why the club was not at all anxious to merge itself with the Southampton people. It was felt that the Scylla and District should bask alone in Deirdre’s reflected glory.”

“Quite reasonable, at that,” said Laura. “But what about Bunt and Colnbrook?”

“I am afraid I can tell you very little more about either of them.”

“Have you *Mrs.* Bath’s address?” asked Dame Beatrice.

Miss Calne supplied this, and Dame Beatrice and Laura drove to a large village along one of the most beautiful main roads in the Forest. On either side the way was thickly wooded behind a broad border of grass well cropped by numerous ponies. The road ran fairly straight, was mildly undulating and, at that time of year, was not particularly heavy with traffic. Numerous signs indicated the need for caution in respect of straying animals and the undesirability of feeding these in the interests of the ponies’ own safety on

the roads, and further signs, sponsored by a display of birch brooms, warned against the risk of forest fires.

At the entrance to the village the car took the Totton road between the golf course and Fox Hill and pulled up at a row of semi-detached bungalows.

Mrs. Bath was doing her ironing in the parlour into which the front door opened. Two innocent-eyed and slightly dirty-faced children were playing on the floor, but suspended their game to stare at the visitors. Dame Beatrice apologised for having arrived at an inconvenient time and suggested that she and Laura should return later.

"If it's the H.P. for next-door's telly," said Mrs. Bath, "you'll get it all right next week. Her husband's getting a bonus, and, anyway, I can't pay it for her."

Dame Beatrice explained that it was not the H.P. for the television set, but that Miss Calne had given her Mrs. Bath's address. Miss Calne's name appeared to have a magic significance, for Mrs. Bath, who had switched off the electric iron in order to answer the door, now stood the iron up on end, invited the visitors in, spat skillfully on to each youthful face and gave it a scrub on the tea-cloth she had just finished ironing, and then offered her callers chairs.

"It'll be about the club, I expect," she said. "Arthur, leave Jenny's dolly alone, else I'll take away your bricks and lock 'em up."

"Well, it is in connection with two members—or, rather, with two ex-members—of the club," Dame Beatrice admitted. "Two, in fact, who are no longer with us in the flesh."

"Oh? Bert Colnbrook and that there Bunt," said Mrs. Bath. "Well, I don't suppose you're police, else my husband would have told me, being tipped off by his brother Alf."

Arthur kicked his small sister's rag doll and came over to Laura.

"My Uncle Alf's a policeman," he said.

"Jolly good," said Laura. She hoisted him on to her knee. "So is my husband."

Mrs. Bath looked slightly apprehensive.

"So you *are* police!" she said.

"No, no, but we are working with the police for a special reason which, when I explain it, I am certain you will appreciate," said Dame Beatrice. She told as much of the story as was necessary. "So, you see," she said in conclusion, "anything which will remove suspicion from this young man and, possibly, from my own grand-nephew, who was with him when the body of Mr. Colnbrook was found in the place to which the foresters had removed it, will undoubtedly relieve their minds and ours."

"Yes, I see that," said Mrs. Bath, "though I shouldn't have thought, myself, that they had anything to be afraid of, being strangers to the club and all that."

"Ah, but that is the trouble. Mr. Richardson was by no means a stranger to the club. He had not only met Mr. Colnbrook on two previous occasions; he had quarrelled with him."

"I'm not surprised. That Bert Colnbrook was a nasty piece of work. I was always warning Mavis Wight against him. 'If you *must* have one of them,' I said to her, 'you better pick that Bunt.' Arthur, you sit still on the lady's lap, else off you get."

Arthur wriggled to the floor, trotted over to his sister and gave her a hearty push. His mother landed a slap on the seat of his pants and the two children immediately settled down to the amusements with which they had been occupied when the visitors arrived.

"What did the other men think of Mr. Colnbrook?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"They didn't particularly mind him, no more nor some of the girls. He was always ready to spend money, you see. The only thing about the girls—the sensible ones, I mean—was that when they'd been to the pictures once with him

they didn't usually go again, excepting for Mabel and Mavis. Mabel was—well, I don't want to say anything against her, and, of course, she isn't really a club member, but her and Mavis always declared that Bert behaved himself with *them*, but, being that she *was* my sister (and living near, what's more), and us having to keep our name clean, my brother-in-law, Mabel's husband, only married three months, being in the police, well—"

"I see. Would Mavis be a well-built, blonde-haired girl about five feet eight inches tall, with a dimple in the right cheek and a slight stammer?"

"That's not Mavis. That's Penny the Putt. But, pardon me, how come *you* know her?"

"I have never met her, but that is the description Mr. Richardson gave of her. He met her on the occasion of his first passage-at-arms with Mr. Colnbrook. This took place in a railway waiting-room, I believe."

"Excuse me," said Laura, "but I think Arthur is trying to force, one of his bricks into the baby's mouth."

"Stop that, Arthur! Do you hear? Else Uncle Alf will take you to the lock-up." Mrs. Bath rose and removed the brick from Arthur's hand. "Penny," she went on, as she put all the bricks on top of the ironing table, "told me all about that station waiting-room lark. She saw it as a joke, but I didn't half tell her off for *her* part in it. Disgraceful! 'The young fellow might have got into serious trouble for Attempted,' I said, 'and a nice thing *that* would be for him. You better steer clear of that Bert Colnbrook,' I said, 'else you'll find yourself in contempt of court,' I said. But she only laughed it off and told me I ought to have seen the young fellow's face when Bert accused him of trying to have Relations."

Dame Beatrice clicked her tongue and preferred the opinion that Mr. Colnbrook had scarcely acted like a gentleman.

"Gentleman? Him?" Mrs. Bath sniffed contemptuously. "Ask Geoff Borrowdale. He'll tell you!"



"I should like to meet him."

"Well, see, what's today? He'll most likely be at the club tomorrow. He generally trains from seven to eight. He'd be good if he trained more, but he runs a Youth Club in Southampton two nights a week, and has the Boy Scouts Tuesdays and Fridays."

"An admirable young man."

"He does it to get away from his widowed mother. She objects to most things, but she can't hardly object to him doing good works. She runs the Unmarried Mothers at the chapel. They go there because she gives them tea and buns. No, you *can't* have a bun, Arthur. It's early closing."

"I wonder," said Dame Beatrice, "whether your sister, the policeman's wife, can give me any further information?"

"What, Mabel? Well, you won't get any police tales. Alf never lets on about his job. I can give you her address. Wouldn't you like a cup of tea before you go?"

Dame Beatrice and Laura politely declined the offer and, having been furnished with the married name and address of sister Mabel, they made their way to her redbrick house.

Mabel was fashionably dressed and her living-room sported a cocktail cabinet. She greeted the visitors with suspicion.

"Well, I don't know," she said, when Dame Beatrice produced her credentials in the form of an introduction from Mrs. Bath. "Anyway, you better come in. Now, what can I do for you?" Dame Beatrice glanced at Laura and raised her eyebrows.

"You can tell us something about a man named Colnbrook, I believe," said Laura.

"Bert? Him that was done in? Well, he had plenty of dough and didn't really mind spending it."

"What does the word *really* signify?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"Oh, well, as to that," said Mabel, "if you know what I mean, he expected to get value for money."

"And did he?"

Mabel grinned and suddenly looked like her sister.

"Sometimes yes and sometimes no," she said. "Anyway, not so far as I was concerned. 'I'm going to be a respectable married woman,' I told him, 'so I don't want none of your larks.' And that's what I am now, of course, He didn't half sheer off when he knew I'd married a policeman. My sister still don't believe I behave, but I do."

"I understand that you do not belong to the Scylla and District Social and Athletic Club," said Dame Beatrice.

"More social than athletic, if you ask *me* said Mabel. "Yes, I do belong, in a kind of way. That's to say, I do the teas and things." Her air of suspicion had vanished. "Of course, I have to support my sister at the club parties. I believe in families, don't you?"

Dame Beatrice, whose family ramifications resembled (she sometimes thought) the luxuriance of a tropical forest, solemnly agreed.

"Apart from the reluctance of some of his women acquaintances to further their friendships with him, would you know whether Mr. Colnbrook had enemies?" she asked.

"Enemies?" Mabel shook her head. "Not to say enemies, no. In fact, he was quite popular in some quarters. A chap who doesn't mind splashing his lolly is bound to be liked by some."

"You are referring to his men friends, as well as to young women, I take it?"

"That's right. Saloon-bar types. *You* know."

"And you never heard of any serious quarrels?"

"Not me, no. One or two may have threatened to knock his block off if he made another pass at their girlfriends, but only in the ordinary way of give and take, if you understand me."

"Nothing, in short, that was likely to lead to murder?"

“Oh, gracious me, no!” (It was obvious that she had not heard about the threat uttered by Richardson.)

“And the other man, Mr. Bunt?”

“Ah, now, *him*. That’s quite a bit different. He was under what you might call a cloud.”

“Drummed out, in fact?” asked Laura.

“Well, there was trouble with the committee, I believe. Somebody did tell me something about it, but I didn’t take much interest. Anyway, he left, and that’s about all I know.”

“We didn’t get much *there*,” said Laura, as they drove back through the town.

“Negative evidence, to employ a paradox, is sometimes useful,” said Dame Beatrice.

# CHAPTER NINE

## Dame Beatrice States the Case

*...though her coffin was fairly sound and unbroken, there was no trace whatever inside it of a body, bones or dust.*

*The Ash-Tree*  
M. R. James

Laura, over the telephone, obtained Mr. Borrowdale's address from the club secretary and asked to be directed also to the stadium. She and Dame Beatrice arrived there on the following evening, after an early dinner at the hotel, in time to see Borrowdale "doing his stuff," as Laura termed it. Herself no mean athlete in her youth, she looked on at his performance with interest. He was a half-miler, he informed her later, but was catching up on his sprinting.

"Tell you anything more than you already know about Bunt and Colnbrook?" he said. "No, of course I can't. Enemies, as such, no, of course they were not. Reason why they got themselves murdered? No idea. Not a very choice couple, of course, but nobody in the club would have killed them."

As he refused to say (or did not know) any more, Dame Beatrice and Laura left him and returned to the hotel.

"Our Mr. Borrowdale doesn't seem to know much," said Laura, "unless, of course, he knows *too* much. I should think we may have to tackle him again."

"Meanwhile we had better make contact with the Superintendent," said Dame Beatrice.

"Exactly why? We've nothing new to tell him."

"Have we not? Well, time, as always, will show."

The hotel was tenanted by a very lugubrious Richardson and a rather deflated Denis. They were in the smallest lounge, the old gentleman who usually commandeered it being on a visit to friends.

"The Superintendent is chasing Tom," said Denis.

"Seems to think that, after all, it was a bit suspicious our finding Colnbrook's body in that enclosure. The only thing that upsets the police theory is that Tom, on his own and without any form of transport, could never have carted the body so far from his tent. I'm pretty sure, too, that they're checking on *my* movements on the night in question."

"They have already done so," said Dame Beatrice.

"Even if I'd had a car, I'd have had to leave it on the heath and cart the body into the enclosure," said Richardson. "You could never get a car along that woodland track. The whole thing would have been a sheer impossibility, but *still* the police are on to me, and probably, as Scab says, on to him as well, if they've checked his movements."

"It just means they really haven't a clue," said Denis, "but it's a bit much that they should keep picking on Tom."

"Well," said Dame Beatrice, "let us do a little straight thinking and then I shall compare our findings with those of the Superintendent."

"Our findings? But we haven't found out *anything!*" Richardson protested.

"Have we not?" Dame Beatrice produced her notebook. "We have found a long list of possible suspects and we may even be in a position to add to it later."

"Oh, you mean the members of the Scylla and District," said Richardson, "but I can't see anything much in that. I mean to say..."

“Take heart, laddie,” said Laura, “and give the oracle a chance to tell her tale.”

“Here, then,” said Dame Beatrice, “is a categorical survey of those who may have had the means, the opportunity, and a motive for wanting Mr. Colnbrook and Mr. Bunt out of the way.”

She stepped over to the door and turned the key in the lock, then she made certain that the French doors which looked out on to the garden were securely bolted down.

“This is the stuff from which thrillers are fabricated,” said Laura, gratified by these proceedings. “Shall I look in the cupboard under the bookcase to make certain no spy is lurking?”

“It is just as well to take precautions against our being interrupted,” said Dame Beatrice. “Now to the matter in hand. Logically, (and here I am bound to see the point of view of the police), Mr. Richardson must be our principal suspect, with Mr. Bradley as his accessory after the fact or even his co-partner in crime.

“Let us examine the evidence against them. Of Mr. Richardson’s plan to pitch a tent on the heath we need say nothing. What *does* seem a little out of the way, however, is that, on his own admission and on the evidence of the hotel ledgers, he took all his meals, even his breakfasts, here. One had supposed that the whole art of camping out included the minor arts of cooking and catering for oneself. Still, we may let that pass.

“What cannot be got over so easily is the circumstance that Mr. Bradley was obliged to delay his coming, and to upset previous plans, on the flimsy and unlikely excuse of having to play polo. Cricket, yes. Cricket is a sacred game. Football, particularly Rugby football, is a possible excuse for breaking a previous engagement. Possibly there might be an injury to another player. ‘Bradley will not fail us.’ One can visualise the scene and hear the ensuing dialogue. But polo—that unnecessary contribution to dangerous occupations,

a relic of the days when India was part of the great British Empire and it was more gentlemanly to ride a pony than to dash about on foot in the broiling sun—polo will not do as an excuse.”

“I *did* play polo,” protested Denis. “And it *was* because one of the team couldn’t turn out. And, dash it all, if the Duke can get away with playing polo, so can I.”

“Ah,” said Laura, “but *your* playing polo was just a blind. I can see Dame B’s point. You *did* play polo, yes. But what did you also do when Colnbrook and Bunt were killed? The polo doesn’t let you out. That’s what the Superintendent thinks.”

Denis nodded. Richardson looked gloomier than ever.

“So the police *have* got something on us,” he said.

“Scab could have popped down here by car, as arranged, helped me with the bodies, and popped back again to fix up this polo alibi for himself. Only, you see, he didn’t.”

“Of course he didn’t,” said Laura, “but Dame Beatrice has to cut down the wood so that we can all see the trees.”

“A striking metaphor,” said Denis. “Go on, dear great-aunt. Who comes next on your list?”

“Oh, but I haven’t finished with you two yet. We have three headings, remember. I have dealt with opportunity. There remain means and motive.”

“I can do those for you,” said Richardson. “From my last teaching post I could have got hold of both the poisons used. From the heath itself I could (I suppose) have supplied myself with adders—although there is nothing to suggest that either of the bodies showed adder bites—and as for motive, well, I’ve managed, in the case of Bunt, to keep mine hidden, but it’s known I had two rows with Colnbrook, and—there you are! Also, as Laura, no doubt, has told you, I knew those chaps were in this neighbourhood.”

“Admirably expressed,” said Dame Beatrice. “Let us move on to the other candidates. Chief among these, of course, are the members of the Scylla and District Social

and Athletic Club, but until we can discover means and motive for any or all of these—opportunity would present no difficulty at all, one assumes—I fear we cannot particularise.”

“One thing,” said Denis. “If Tom could have got hold of the prussic acid and the potassium stuff, so could the science bloke at the school.”

“And the art master,” said Laura. “Didn’t you say that he went in for engraving?”

“There’s also that little toad of a lab boy,” said Denis. “You mentioned him, I think.”

“The difficulty here is that we cannot show, at present, any connection between any one of these three and the dead men,” said Dame Beatrice. “Where was this school, Mr. Richardson?”

“In a little place called Want, not far from Basingstoke.”

“I see. Not so *very* far away from *here*, either.”

“No, I suppose not. But it’s absurd to think that Joliffe and Draco could have had anything to do with the murders, and the lab kid is only seventeen, although a bit of a wart.”

“So was Henry Thingummy only seventeen,” said Laura. “You can’t go by age.”

“A boy of seventeen might murder *one* person. But to kill *two*, unless he were...” said Dame Beatrice.

“A pathological case?” said Denis. “Yes, it would seem to be beyond the scope of the average lad, but all the same...”

“There’s no such thing as the average lad,” said Laura, belligerently.

“Oh, but there is,” said Richardson. “You’d be surprised. There’s a common factor. If you’d taught in boys’ schools...”

“Only because everybody dreads being different from everybody else,” said Laura, interrupting him. “You can’t tell what they all *really* think, and I shall always maintain that...”

“There are still a few daring young men on the flying trapeze?” asked Dame Beatrice, giving an eldritch cackle.



"Well, I don't claim to be one of those. But we're straying from the point, aren't we?" said Richardson, defeated, he thought, by the ladies. "We were talking about my last school."

"And now," said Dame Beatrice, "we are going to talk about your last employer. You coached his son, I believe, and left them your holiday address. Why did you do that? Furthermore, what kind of people are they, and where do they live?"

"Oh, they live just outside Southampton. I didn't like them much, but I don't see any reason why they should be mixed up in these goings on. I gave them my address because they asked for it and promised to send me my last month's pay, which they have done."

"And the son whom you coached?"

"Oh, a bit short on intellect and rather a little wart, but I felt sorry for the poor kid. He was spoilt most of the time; otherwise he was grouched at because he wasn't grateful enough for the spoiling. Quite a hopeless sort of situation, I thought, and not at all calculated to produce a first-class citizen. I'll write down the address for you, but I really don't want them bothered. There *can't* be any connection."

"You are probably right," said Dame Beatrice, "but, as Laura would tell you, we must leave no stone unturned. To resume, and to rejoin our sheep, there remain other suspects and it is for you, Mr. Richardson, to decide which we examine first."

"Well, but who are they? I can't think of anybody else."

"Oh, but surely! What about the people in the house from which you tried to telephone? What about the people (visitors and staff) who live, or did live, in this hotel?"

"Some assignment!" said Laura. "And, of course," she added, "there are always the members of other athletics clubs. Some of *them* may have had it in for Colnbrook and Bunt."

"Why, so they may," said Dame Beatrice, leering at her in a confidential fashion.

"Good heavens, of course not!" said Richardson, aghast. "It's not the sort of thing that's ever done!"

Denis clicked his tongue sadly.

"*Et tu, Brute?*" he asked. Richardson gave him a sharp glance which was not misinterpreted either by Laura or by Dame Beatrice.

"So there *is* a nigger in the woodpile," said the former, when, having bade the young men good night, she was seated in an armchair in her employer's first-floor room.

"By that, you infer...?" said Dame Beatrice.

"That there is something more which Tom ought to tell us. That baby boy ain't as innocent as he would have us believe."

"Dear me," said Dame Beatrice mildly. "I really think you'd better go to bed."

"The bar is still open," said Laura. "I will repair thither and seek truth in the bottom of a glass of their excellent beer." She did this and was ready with her findings for Dame Beatrice at breakfast on the following morning.

"What I *don't* understand," she said, "is the business of swapping over the bodies. Why go to all that trouble? Why not have left Colnbrook in Tom's tent and carted Bunt's body into that enclosure? It just doesn't make *sense*!"

"The difference between sense and nonsense is understood only by the critics of modern plays, dear child,"

"One man's meat is another man's—here, I say!" exclaimed Laura. "Haven't we perhaps *got* something there? Could one of them have been taking it as a medicine?"

"You've been doing too much reading," said Dame Beatrice, "but, yes, I am compelled to agree that, although prussic acid can scarcely be classed as a medicine, there *is* a very mild preparation which is used in food as a flavouring."

"So where does that get us?"

“Nowhere,” admitted Dame Beatrice, treating Laura to a crocodile grin. “But remember, in the words of the immortal Quince, that truth makes all things plain. In addition, although Pyramus did not kill Thisbe, he was, in a sense, as responsible for her death as the lion was for his.”

“Sez you!” said Laura, incensed by this intrusion into her own treasure-house of apt quotation. “Well, where do we go from here?”

# CHAPTER TEN

## The Superintendent Reviews It

*Nobody supposes that the digging up of antiquities is in itself a scientific end...*

*Digging Up the Past*  
Sir Leonard Wolley

"There remain," said Dame Beatrice, "the hotel staff. They could all have known that Mr. Richardson was encamped on the heath."

The Superintendent rubbed his jaw.

"Are you *seriously* thinking that one of the hotel servants is guilty, ma'am?" he enquired.

"No, I am not," said Dame Beatrice, "but I suppose we ought to look at the thing in the round. What is your own idea?"

"I can see nothing nearer than Mr. Richardson himself. All the evidence seems to point that way. We have witnesses of his two disagreements with Colnbrook. What is more, one of the quarrels, that one in the station waiting-room, seems to have been of a serious nature."

"Against that, we must put the murder of Mr. Bunt. There is nothing whatever to connect *him* with Mr. Richardson, is there?"

"No," said the Superintendent thoughtfully. "What's more, for what it's worth, Dame Beatrice, Bunt was not, as one might say, an indigenous product. He came to

Southampton from the Transvaal and had been over here only about three years before he was killed."

"Shades of potassium cyanide!" said Dame Beatrice. "Do they not, in those latitudes, use large amounts of it in extracting gold from ores?"

The Superintendent looked startled; then he recollected himself and smiled.

"It wouldn't account for the prussic acid," he said. Dame Beatrice said that she was not so sure.

"Derivatives postulate a main substance," she argued. "Those who know potassium cyanide may surely have some passing acquaintance with hydrocyanic acid?"

The Superintendent politely disagreed.

"I don't see it, ma'am, but then, of course, I'm not a doctor."

"And I'm not a chemist, Superintendent. All the same, I hardly see how you are going to establish a connection between Mr. Richardson and Mr. Bunt, and, from the circumstance of Mr. Richardson's tent having been used to house both the bodies, I deduce that the two murders were committed by the same person or persons."

"Well, I'll take another look at the hotel staff, of course, ma'am, but I don't really think we shall pin anything on anybody there."

"One of the guests, perhaps," said Dame Beatrice.

"We've done a certain amount of work on those who were staying in the hotel at the time. Most people cooperated well, but one or two were a bit sticky, especially the residents. It needed a lot of tact to get them to tell us they couldn't help us!"

"Did nothing come of your efforts?"

"Not a thing. None of them even seems to have noticed what time young Richardson came in that night. I've had a good go at the manager and the porter, but it hasn't led to anything. The manager had gone up to bed and all the porter can tell me is that Richardson was 'in a pretty fair

taking,' which is only what you'd expect, whether he's guilty or innocent."

"Quite so. I wish we knew the reason why the first body was put into Mr. Richardson's tent and then the second body substituted for it."

The Superintendent looked at her for a moment or two before he said,

"We've only Mr. Richardson's word for it that Colnbrook's body ever *was* in the tent, ma'am. And he wasn't any too frank with me about it, you know."

"I cannot see why he should have lied about it, though. As for his lack of frankness, that, surely, was a matter of being stricken with panic, a perfectly natural reaction I should have thought."

"I don't like the way the body was found in that enclosure. Of all the miles and miles of woods and open heath which make up the Forest, why did he choose to go with Mr. Bradley to that one particular part? It was too much of a coincidence altogether."

"Oh, I do not agree with you there, Superintendent. The wood was a natural enough place in which to hide the body, and it was a natural enough place for the young men to choose for their walk. Besides, there was the dog. Then, again, the body had not been hidden just where they stumbled upon it, you know. The woodmen confessed that they had moved it."

"I haven't lost sight of that fact, ma'am. A good old dressing down I gave them, too. Destroying evidence, I told them. One of them had the cheek to tell me that a whole lot more evidence would have been destroyed if a tree-trunk had fallen right across the body. He was correct, in a way, I suppose, but I wouldn't let him get away with it. I told him that he and his mates might think themselves lucky not to be charged with being accessories after the fact." He chuckled. "That shook 'em up a bit."

"What about the school near Basingstoke?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"We'd have to find a connection between the masters there and the two dead men. It seems a very long shot to me, ma'am."

"I don't think it need necessarily be such a very long shot, Superintendent, and, from your point of view, it would bring Mr. Richardson back into the picture. Besides, if he was teaching at the school at the time of one of these quarrels with Colnbrook, it *could* be that somebody else on the staff had also met members of the Scylla and District Club. Had you thought of that?"

The Superintendent looked doubtful.

"We could hardly see our way clear," he said. "We've nothing at all against the school, and Mr. Richardson has had a tutoring job, as you know, since he left there. We see no reason, at present, for us to trouble the Headmaster and his staff."

"Then what about the people at that house from which Mr. Richardson hoped to telephone you?"

"Yes, we could get on to that, I suppose. You see, ma'am, there we have nothing, again, but Mr. Richardson's word to go on. We don't know that he ever went to the house."

"What about the maid who answered the door? She is certain to remember that evening."

"She has only to deny that he called, ma'am."

"You had better leave her to me, then. She was not the only servant left in the house, if you remember."

"That's if we accept Mr. Richardson's story."

"Well, it would do no harm to make an enquiry, would it?"

"As a matter of fact, we went there," said the Superintendent, looking her in the eye.

"Really? Whom did you see?"

"Everybody in the house, including, I have no doubt, the maid in question. Not a very bright specimen, but we couldn't shake her. She swore that nobody came to the door that night."

"Oh, dear! I suppose you picked on the right girl?"

The Superintendent shook his head.

"She wasn't very bright," he repeated, "but it seems that she is the one who always answers the door."

"She may have been coached by her employers, don't you think? Naturally, they would not wish to be involved in a case of murder."

"They were not at home when, or if, Mr. Richardson called, ma'am. They were in London to see a show, and they stayed at a hotel in Kensington a couple of nights. We checked on that, and their name is in the hotel register all right."

"Well, there is the evidence that Mr. Richardson did call, then. How otherwise could he have known they were not at home?"

"He could have seen them go off, ma'am. The road between the house and the bridge, the only way a car could take, is visible from where he was camping. We've proved that."

"I still think he called at the house that night to try to telephone you. If he did, the girl is lying. I'd like to meet her and form my own conclusions. It seems a suitable task for a psychiatrist. What do you think?"

"That if she *is* lying, ma'am, it is for the reason you yourself suggested. She's been got at by her employers, who don't intend to be mixed up in a case of murder."

"Yes. However, perhaps I can find a way of getting her to come, as my secretary puts it, clean. It seems an odd coincidence to me that two dead bodies should have been in the immediate neighbourhood of that house just when the owners of it happened to be away from home."

"Coincidence is known to have a long arm, ma'am."



"And ourselves a long leg, asking to be pulled, Superintendent. What did you make of the couple?"

"Oh, about what one would expect. Well-off—you have to be, to buy even a moderate-sized estate in the Forest these days—easy-going, on the surface, but I fancy there's a pretty hard streak underneath. The husband is obviously not quite a gentleman. The wife, I should imagine, married beneath her, as they say, probably for money. Still, they seem to get on well enough together. They received me civilly but showed me the door as soon as they possibly could. I don't blame them for that. Nobody likes to have a policeman about the place—not that they've got neighbours to pry and speculate, that's one thing."

"How did the domestics react?"

"Oh, as we find servants almost invariably do. There was a mixture of nervousness and excitement and the usual urge to get their picture in the papers."

"Well, I still think I might find a visit to that house very interesting. You have no objection, I take it?"

"None in the least, Dame Beatrice. If you do get anything useful, you'll remember our agreement?"

"You shall learn all. What is the name of these people?"

"Campden-Towne."

Dame Beatrice did not take Laura with her, neither did she take the walk across the heath and by the stream. Her car, to the ill-concealed distress of her chauffeur George, turned off the road which led from the hotel on to the common and took the same vile, loose, pot-holed track as the police-car had used. George drove slowly, but soon they came to the bridge, after a turn to the left, crossed it, and made a stately progress, in spite of the gravel over which the car was crunching, up to the house.

Dame Beatrice sent George to knock at the front door, having furnished him with the name which she had obtained from the Superintendent. He returned, very shortly, with the information that the householder himself was not at home,

but that his wife would be happy to grant Dame Beatrice an interview.

The maid—the same, presumably, as had refused Richardson the use of the telephone—showed her into a large, well-furnished room in which a strongly-built woman of between thirty-five and forty was standing looking at the only picture. She turned, as the maid announced the visitor, and Dame Beatrice noted that she had large, sad eyes and almost no chin.

“How do you do?” the woman said. “Please sit down. I don’t think we’ve met before, have we?”

“No, we have not,” replied Dame Beatrice, seating herself in the chair indicated, “and you may wish that we had not met now.”

“Oh, dear! Are you asking for a subscription for something? I’m afraid my husband sees to all that kind of thing.”

“I am not asking for a subscription. I am asking for help in a different kind of way. I am told by the police...”

“By the police?”

“Of course. I am consultant psychiatrist to the Home Office.”

“Oh, dear! Well, what do you want to know?”

“I want to know why you and your husband were absent from this house when a young man discovered a dead body in his tent on the heath.”

“Well, really, Dame Beatrice! I don’t know that I understand you! My husband has told the police where we were, and our reason for being there. I can add nothing to what he said. It was the simple truth. In any case, I cannot see what is your own interest in the matter. It was all very horrid and very sordid, no doubt, but, really, it was nothing to do with us, as I told the Superintendent.”

“I could wish that you and your husband had been at home that night, though.”

“Exactly why?”

"Because I am quite sure that you would have been only too ready to admit the unfortunate owner of the tent and that you would have allowed him to telephone the police."

"Most unlikely, at that time of night! In any case, except to oblige the young man, what difference could it have made?"

"I can tell you, provided that you will undertake to confide it to nobody but your husband."

"Very well."

"The body which the police saw lying in the tent was *not* the body about which young Mr. Richardson wished to telephone the police."

"*What!*"

"No. The first body was that which was stumbled upon (quite literally) by Mr. Richardson and his friend in the enclosure on the far side of the heath."

"Good gracious! What an extraordinary thing!"

"By the way," said Dame Beatrice, "I wonder whether I might have a word with the girl who answers the door. She did answer it, did she not, to Mr. Richardson that night?"

"Oh, yes, I suppose so. I'll go and get her. You won't find her very intelligent, I'm afraid."

She went out of the room and left Dame Beatrice to gaze at the picture, which happened to be the coloured portrait of a florid, clean-shaven, thick-set middle-aged man whom Dame Beatrice took to be the husband of her reluctant hostess. The latter was gone for nearly ten minutes and returned with a scared-looking girl of about seventeen.

"This is Myrtle," she said. "I'd better leave you together."

"Thank you," said Dame Beatrice. "Good morning, Myrtle. I don't know whether you can help me."

Myrtle mumbled unintelligibly and twisted nail-bitten fingers in her apron.

"You've read about these horrible murders, of course," Dame Beatrice went on. "Well, now, I wonder whether you can describe a young man who called here on the night in question and wanted to use the telephone?"

"The night in question, madam?" Myrtle abandoned the picking at her apron.

"Yes, the night in question, Myrtle. You're not always having young men call after dark asking to use the telephone, so do not deny that he came. I happen to know that he did."

"Oh, *him!* Well, I shut the door too quick to see much of him. I was scared, see, on account we was alone in the house."

"We being...?"

"Cook, Shirl, and me."

"Oh, yes. Your master and mistress had gone to London, I believe."

"That's right, and it was the master as told me to say as nobody called. He didn't want to be mixed up in anything, he said."

"Well, now, what about this young man?"

"He was out of breath, but he talked posh and his hair needed combing. You don't mean...?" Her mouth fell open as her mind assimilated a new, delicious, terrifying idea.

"You don't mean as I've spoke with a *murderer*, do you?"

"Well, we can't go so far as that at present, but the police are keeping an open mind."

"The police are keepin' an open mind," repeated Myrtle, obviously memorising the phrase. "Coo, wait till I tells Cook and Shirl!"

"And you can add nothing to your description?"

"Art a mo." She wrinkled her brow in deep thought, but was obliged to shake her head. "I don't know as I can. You see, I shut the door quick as I could 'cos I was scared. I always 'ave been scared of knocks on the door at night, without I knows who to expect."

"Very natural, in a lonely house such as this. How long have you worked here?"

"I come here last March twelvemonth. Oh, I do 'ope the master won't bawl me out, but it was missus as changed what I was to say."

"Is your home in the village?"

"No. I comes from t' other side the common, from the Children's 'Ome over there."

"I see. Well, thank you, Myrtle. Oh, there is just one more thing. I suppose you didn't happen to notice what the time was when this young man called?"

"Not to speak of it in the witness-box like." It was clear that Myrtle already saw herself in a prominent position in court. "Still, we'd had our supper, which is nine o'clock by Cook's alarm, and I'd finished washing-up which Cook won't never allow no dirty crocks to wait over till the morning, but we hadn't ack'chelly gone to bed, although I'd done me curlers so I suppose it would have been about ten o'clock when he come."

This tallied reasonably well with Richardson's own story. Dame Beatrice returned to the hotel and telephoned the Superintendent. She invited him to lunch and, when it was over, they commandeered the small drawing-room lounge and she gave him an account of her visit.

"You think that Myrtle was briefed before she was brought in to you," said the Superintendent.

"On her own admission there is nothing else to think. Mrs. Campden-Towne went out of the room to bring her, instead of ringing the bell, and was gone longer than one would have thought necessary. The girl made no attempt to deny that Mr. Richardson had called, she stated that her mistress had changed the tale, and her estimate of the time coincides, nearly enough, with his own."

"Hm, yes, it does look as though Myrtle had been got at both times. I wonder whether the Campden-Townes decided, after all, that they'd been foolish to tell her to keep her

mouth shut, or whether it was her own idea in the first place and Campden-Towne agreed to it. Anyway, it confirms Mr. Richardson's story so far as the attempt to telephone is concerned and, that being so, it does appear that he got in touch with us as soon as he could. So there's that much in his favour. Oh, well, there's plenty of work to be done in a routine sort of style. We're still digging away at the friends and acquaintances of the two deceased. The thing that bothers us is that there must have been some closer connection between Bunt and Colnbrook than mere membership of that athletic and social club."

"I still propose to visit the school and I also intend to interview the last employers of Mr. Richardson."

"Oh, the private coaching job? I don't think you'll get much there, Dame Beatrice. Besides..." he grinned, "...I thought you were out to exonerate Mr. Richardson, not to push him further into the red. We've got it on pretty good authority that he got the sack from there."

Dame Beatrice cackled. She got up from her comfortable armchair. The Superintendent also rose, unlocked the door, which they had fastened against intruders, took down the notice marked *Private* which the manager had put up, refused Dame Beatrice's offer of hospitality, and went out to his car.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## Headmaster and Staff

*He made also ten tables, and placed them in the temple, five on the right side, and five on the left. And he made a hundred basins of gold. Furthermore he made the court of the priests, and the great court, and doors for the court, and overlaid the doors of them with brass.*

2nd Chronicles 3, Authorised Version

The preparatory school at which Richardson had taught proved to be a show place on which, it was obvious to Dame Beatrice, (who, in her capacities as mother, grandmother, aunt, honorary aunt, great-aunt, and godmother, had visited many preparatory and public schools), a great deal of money had been spent. She suspected that mulcted parents had been compelled to contribute to the splendour. However, it was easy enough to see where the money had gone.

The Headmaster, who appeared to know her not only by reputation but who claimed to have been present at a dinner where she had been the principal guest, welcomed her with the utmost cordiality. He received her in a large, beautifully furnished study whose windows overlooked the playing fields, and he insisted upon showing her over the school before he heard on what errand she had come.

They visited the swimming bath, the chapel, and the library. To Dame Beatrice's satisfaction, after they had looked in upon the various classrooms and the woodwork and metalwork rooms, they visited the laboratories. There were two of these, both equipped as though for postgraduate research. One was for biology, the other for chemistry.

Dame Beatrice affected great interest in the first, despite her repugnance to the animals and birds, stuffed and defunct, which, exhibited in glass cases, appeared to be a prominent feature of the room.

"Outside, of course," said the Headmaster, "we keep our rabbits. The caretaker looks after them during the holidays. So good for the boys to learn to look after animals and it reduces sex instruction to the minimum."

He seemed about to enlarge upon this when he received an urgent message from someone who urgently desired his presence elsewhere, so, pausing only to apologise to Dame Beatrice for leaving her, and to promise to "send Stevens" to look after her, he departed.

Stevens turned out to be the head boy, an extremely good-looking, scrupulously well-groomed child of about thirteen. He introduced himself.

"Please, Dame Beatrice, I'm Stevens. The Head said to show you the chemistry lab. I don't think you'll find it very interesting. It's only bottles and Bunsen burners and test tubes and beakers and retorts and those sort of things."

"I feel," said Dame Beatrice, "that I might hurt the Headmaster's feelings if I left it out. Is a class going on in there, I wonder?"

"Almost bound not to be. It isn't much used because we haven't got a proper stinks master since the last one left."

"Dear me! How long ago was that?"

"Soon after Mr. Richardson went."

"So I suppose a laboratory boy is no longer employed here."



"Well, actually, he still is. It isn't easy to get a good lab boy, you see, because they're not paid enough, so I think that's why the Head has stuck to Borgia. He potters about in there, keeping things dusted, and he's got to make a list of the stock, and things like that, and he keeps the two labs clean and feeds the rabbits and the aquarium fish and all that, so I suppose he's worth his wages."

"I must make the acquaintance of this man of many parts. What is his name?"

"Well, we call him Borgia. It's rather apt, you see, because, well, his job is mostly in the stinks lab and, well, he does keep on about poisons. I don't know his real name."

The chemistry laboratory was on the other side of a stretch of well-tended lawn and took up the first floor of a two-storied building of modern design.

"The ground floor is a sort of drill-hall for chaps who've been sentenced," Dame Beatrice's guide explained. "If chaps cheek the prefects, or don't come in quickly enough from games, and things like that, they get sentenced to run so many times round the drill-hall. A master is on duty to see they do their proper stint. If they slack, he has authority to speed them up with a cane. Otherwise we don't, on the whole, get beaten. I mean, you have to do something really pretty bad. The only chap who's really had it since I've been here was a rather sporting type who gave a pretty ripe adjective in an English lesson and, when asked to explain, said he was only quoting from *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Obvious, we all thought, but he still got a stroking. Rather a dim shame, actually, to cane chaps for quoting the classics. I mean, look at the Latin authors, my father says."

"Indeed, yes," Dame Beatrice solemnly agreed, "but written Latin, one surmises, was sometimes intended as a matter for mirth, rather than as an instrument for special pleading. What is your own opinion?"

"I thought *Lady Chatterley* howlingly funny. You had to skip the dull bits, of course, which were most of it."

They left the drill-hall by mounting a staircase. Swing doors opened on to the chemistry laboratory. Dame Beatrice prowled around and was examining one of the cupboards when the Headmaster reappeared.

"Ah, boy," he said, to Stevens, "run along now."

"Good-bye, Dame Beatrice," said Stevens.

"A good boy—a very good boy," said the Headmaster, when the child had disappeared. "I hope he has shown you round. He is up for Charterhouse. He should do very nicely, I think. Well, now!"

"Yes," said Dame Beatrice. "He tells me that you have lost your science master."

"True, true, unfortunately only too true. An excellent teacher, but, of course..."

"Yes?"

"Industry, you know."

"Oh, he has gone into a factory, has he?"

"Longer hours, shorter holidays, but with far more money and no necessity to keep school discipline. Keeping discipline, dear lady, is the bugbear and the despair of many science masters and some of the French teachers of French. The average boy seems to be inimical to French and to be several steps ahead of the teacher of chemistry. But I have a new man coming very soon, I hope."

"You had a young man named Richardson on your staff some time ago, I believe."

"Richardson? Richardson? Ah, yes, of course I had. A promising teacher, in his way, but he left us to go into private practice—a tutoring job, you know."

"You regretted parting with your chemistry master. Did you feel equally sorry to see Mr. Richardson go?"

"I gave him a very good testimonial."

This professional gambit was not lost on Dame Beatrice. She cackled.

"The man you want to get rid of gets the best testimonial," she said. The Headmaster looked pained.

"No, no, really," he protested. "Of course, an Arts man is always very much easier to replace than a Science or Maths man."

("Culture's two a penny these days," remarked Laura, ungrammatically but truly, when she heard this.)

"I see," said Dame Beatrice. "Did you ever think of him as a possible murderer?"

The Headmaster did not attempt to pretend that he misunderstood her.

"I have asked myself the question since the crisis to which you refer became local knowledge," he said. "My answer is that Mr. Richardson, no matter what the provocation, is quite incapable of delivering the *coup de grace*. More's the pity," he added. "One really ought to be a better man than Gunga Din, you know."

"Why?" Dame Beatrice enquired. The Headmaster waved his hand.

"Hewers of wood and drawers of water," he said vaguely. "And by Gunga Din I mean the average boy. Not that there is, of course, an average boy, I suppose, but it's astonishing and enlightening and also rather depressing, to realise how very much alike they all are. I remember my relief, in young manhood, when I realised that my sins were shared by every young man in the world. Bad for the ego, but a solace to the conscience."

"To the conscience?" Dame Beatrice enquired. "I wish I knew what the difference is between conscience and the fear of the law. There *are* the saints, of course, and one hesitates to condemn them for wrongheadedness." She paused. The Headmaster said he felt that, in the majority of cases, if there were no retribution there would be a great deal more crime. By this he did not refer to the hanging of murderers. There was, in his opinion, no need to be barbarous, and, that, in any case, murder was not always a crime, although it might be so described by those brought up in the generation which had anticipated his own.

They got on in capital fashion and drank sherry together, the Headmaster explaining that he kept port and sherry to offer to H.M. Inspectors of Schools. He had taken the very first opportunity of opening his school to the Ministry. Parents liked to think that Dotheboys Hall was out of date and that each child was bedded in a hygienic dormitory and was entitled to its quota of cubic feet of air in the classroom.

"Talking of space, as represented by the cubic feet to which you refer," said Dame Beatrice, "your chemistry classes appear to be particularly lucky."

"Oh, the science lab, yes. Good set-up there. I rather pride myself on it. We have to move with the times. We even have a model launching station."

"And a poisons cupboard, I believe."

"Every amenity, dear lady." He smiled, but looked a trifle anxious.

Dame Beatrice thanked him for showing her round the school, referred to Stevens with warmth, and began to take her leave. The poisons were in the school chemistry laboratory, and she had seen them. This did not add up to much, in her opinion. Even less than before did she believe that Richardson had guilty knowledge of the two murders.

There was one person whom, so far, she had not encountered, but whom she was determined to meet and question. The simple thing to do was to ask the Headmaster outright whether she might interview the youth. This plan she abandoned in favour of asking the school caretaker where she might find the lab boy.

"Him?" said the caretaker. "He'll be in the caff. Nothing much doing for him at the school till they get a new science master."

"But the Headmaster keeps him on?"

"Might get a science master any time."

"And lab boys are not very easy to come by, I suppose. What is this one like?"

"Proper little 'Itler."

"Really? I wonder what you mean by that?"

"Punch-drunk with power."

"Ah, yes, I see. He feels that in his hands he holds the lives of all in the school, both Staff and boys."

"Something of that sort."

"I really do understand. It is not an uncommon feeling, especially when one has access to deadly poisons. What is his name?"

"Ere, I never said nothing about poisons," said the caretaker. "Anyway, name of Borgia—or so 'e claims."

The café, indicated with a certain amount of reluctance by the caretaker, proved to be a respectable shop which sold cakes and ice-cream and where coffee and soft drinks were dispensed in a room which opened off the back of the premises.

The interior gave promise of the same quietness. Dame Beatrice, guided by a kindly girl who wore a black frock and a small blue apron, took a seat and ordered coffee and biscuits. She also asked whether the waitress knew a Mr. Borgia.

"Borgia?" repeated the girl. She smiled. "I think it's just his nonsense, madam. There he is, at that table over there, with his girlfriend. Ask *me*, his name's Smith, Jones, or Brown—something more like that."

"Or, of course, Robinson," said Dame Beatrice absently. "I should very much like to meet him."

"Well, he wouldn't be everybody's fancy, madam, being, in my opinion, a nasty bumbacious piece of work, but his girlfriend has got to get back to the shop in ten minutes, so he'll be on his own after that. He'll likely sit on in here, smoking his fags. He generally does. Got nothing much else to do until they get a new science master up at the private school, so he told me."

"I wonder whether you would be kind enough to give him this note?" said Dame Beatrice, scribbling it as she

spoke. "You may read it, if you wish to do so."

She sipped the execrable brew which the café had provided and watched the waitress deliver the written message. The young man, a black-haired, pale-faced, rather spotty individual in a shiny and tight-fitting bright blue suit, looked across at her, made a remark to his girlfriend, who giggled, and then hitched his chair round so that his back was towards Dame Beatrice.

She waited, drinking, in the meanwhile, what she could of the hell-brew. This involved taking the smallest possible sips of it and she soon signalled the waitress to take the rest away.

"It's horrible stuff, madam," said the waitress, sympathetically, "but we can't make it no better at the price. Ah, there she goes."

This last remark was a species of obituary on Borgia's girlfriend, who rose from his table, slapped him lightly on the top of his brilliantined head, and strolled with swinging hips out of the café. Borgia sped her with a slightly vulgar pleasantry and then came across to Dame Beatrice.

"So what?" he asked.

"Sit down," said Dame Beatrice. "I fear that I cannot recommend the coffee. Did you have any?"

"Me? No. A cuppa does me." He looked at her suspiciously. "Not as I need one now," he added. "Anyway, I don't take nothing from dames."

"I am sure you do not. No really manly young man would."

"What do you want with me, anyway?" Borgia demanded, highly suspicious of the compliment.

"Tales out of school."

"*How* much?"

"Tell me all about hydrocyanic acid."

"Eh? Why?"

"Because I represent the Home Office."

"What's that?"

"Ultimately it is the authority which decides whether murderers shall be hanged."

"Oh, I see. And you represents 'em, does you?" His voice was contemptuous. Dame Beatrice leered at him and answered him blandly.

"From the psychiatric angle, yes. Now, look here, my poor young man, for your own sake you would be well advised to answer my questions."

"And for why?"

"Two people have been poisoned, the one by hydrocyanic acid and the other by potassium cyanide. So far as we have been able to discover, you are one of the few people connected with the case who had access to both these poisons."

"Wodger mean, connected with the case? I don't know nothing about it!"

"Come now," said Dame Beatrice persuasively, "you cannot deny that both substances are to be found in the school laboratory in which you work."

"*Did work.*"

"I accept that amendment. You knew that they were there, and I have it upon evidence that you have been known to boast that you could kill the whole school, if you wished to do so."

"It was only a bit of a joke." He was on the defensive at last.

"So I suppose, but it may help you to avoid being suspected of two dastardly murders if you will help me in my enquiries."

"Ow?"

"By telling me who, besides yourself and the science master, could have known that the poisons were there."

"Why, anybody could of knowed—anybody at the school, that is."

"Yes, but who, in particular, comes into your mind? You realise that one of the two murdered men may have had

one particular connection with the school?"

"I don't realise nothing." She knew that he did not. It would have been surprising if he had.

"Look, Mr.... er...Borgia..." she said.

"That ain't my name!"

"No, I did not suppose it was. On the other hand, you appear to have been proud enough of calling yourself by it until now."

"I ain't give nobody no poison!"

"It might suit me to believe that, if I had no other sources of information."

Borgia raised his voice.

"You're out to frame me! I don't know nothing about it! My name's Robinson and you're tryin' to take it away! Leave me be, I tell you, else I'll *do* you, you old...!"

"Very well," said Dame Beatrice.

Robinson stood up and leaned menacingly over her.

"You ain't 'eard the last of this," he said. "No, nor you ain't 'eard the last of *me*, neither."

"I look forward to the oral reunion," said Dame Beatrice. "Nevertheless, should anything come to your mind which might clear you of active participation in this affair, it might be as well to let me know. This address will find me." She put a visiting-card on the table. The young man snatched it up.

"Oh?" he said, studying it. "Oh, I getcher, Dame. Well, I better think things over. Ta for the tip. Be seein' yer."

It was a strange kind of retreat, Dame Beatrice thought. She had scared him. So much was obvious. But whether he had guilty knowledge of the murders, or whether there was something else on his conscience, or whether, like so many persons, ignorant or otherwise, he had a horror of anything to do with the police, it was neither just nor possible, at this stage, to determine.

"He sounds a gosh-awful little oik," commented Laura, when she was accorded an account of the interview. "Do



you really think he did it?"

"We should need to establish a connection between him and the two dead men before we could begin to speculate upon his guilt or innocence, child, and I do not think that any such connection exists."

"Meaning," said Laura shrewdly, "that, although he's a filthy little basket, you don't believe he'd commit murder."

"Well, not these particular murders. No, frankly, I do not think he would use poison. It would require an even lower type of mentality than that with which heaven appears to have blessed him, to call himself Borgia, if he really *did* intend to poison people, don't you think?"

"I've stopped thinking about this case," said Laura. "I always come back to the same old starting-point."

"And that, in your opinion, is...?"

"Who on earth except Denis could have known that Richardson was camping up there on the heath *and* that he'd had two rows with that man? Again, who would have risked changing over the bodies like that, knowing (I somehow feel), that Richardson had seen the first one?"

"Ah," said Dame Beatrice, wagging her head. "Think it out for yourself. There is only one answer to each of those questions and I fancy I know what it is. But we must have proof."

# CHAPTER TWELVE

## Woman and Child

*What a situation am I in! If what you say  
appears, I shall then find a guilty son.*

*She Stoops to Conquer*  
Oliver Goldsmith

The boy was called Clive Maidston and appeared to be a spoilt child. Mr. Maidston was at work when Dame Beatrice called, and his wife received her with a certain amount of reserve.

"Mr. Richardson?" she said. "Well, there, of course, there were difficulties."

"I *liked* Mr. Richardson," said Clive. "You needn't have sent him away."

"Oh, he was sent away, was he?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"It wasn't my fault," said the boy. "I didn't want him to leave."

"Now, Clive," said his mother, "you must either go out of the room or else you must stop listening."

"Sex means nothing to me," said Clive, a small, pale boy with large eyes. "When I'm eighteen I shall go into a monastery. I may get a bit of peace there."

"They wouldn't have you, dear. You have to be a *good* boy for that," retorted his mother.

"You think you have a vocation?" asked Dame Beatrice, fixing the child with her basilisk gaze.

"I'm pretty sure I have."

"How old are you?"

"Never you mind. God made me what I am."

"We must circumvent Him, then."

"You're a nut case."

"And you," his mother broke in, "are a rude, impertinent boy and a disgrace to your upbringing."

"Impudent, not impertinent. Why don't you use the dictionary?" demanded the child. "Well, what have you come for?" he asked Dame Beatrice. "You're not one of these psychology sharks, are you?"

Dame Beatrice leered at him.

"Your perspicacity does you credit," she replied. "How did you guess, I wonder?"

"I didn't. I was being bloody rude."

"*Clive! Really!*" protested his mother.

"Why *was* Mr. Richardson dismissed?" Dame Beatrice enquired. She was beginning to wonder why Richardson had not resigned this particular post instead of waiting to be asked to leave.

"It was the letters," said Clive.

"Clive, dear, don't be *silly!* You know nothing about it," said his mother.

"I do, too. I read the letters. They were all lies. Mr. Richardson didn't have a girlfriend in this house."

"Who said anything about girls?"

"Oh, mother, be your age!"

"I believe that particular expression to be outdated," said Dame Beatrice.

"Well, how the hell should I know? I'm not allowed to go anywhere, or see anybody or anything!" He flung himself on the floor and began to drum his heels. "Why can't I go back to school?"

"Oh, dear!" said his mother. "Now he's gone into one of his moods! He really is *terribly* difficult!"

"I wouldn't be difficult if you weren't a...old...!" screamed Clive. Dame Beatrice picked him up, and stood him on his feet, and gave him a slight and friendly shake.

"That's enough," she said gently. "Go out of the room and come back when you can behave like a boy and not like an hysterical little puppy."

"Well, really!" said his mother. Clive glowered darkly at Dame Beatrice and muttered, "I'll *get* you," but he went out of the room.

"Now," said Dame Beatrice, "what can you tell me about Mr. Richardson?"

"Oh, but I must go and see to Clive. We never know *what* to do with him when he flies into one of his tempers. He might throw himself out of his bedroom window. He's often threatened it."

"Always a splendid sign. The children who do it seldom threaten it beforehand."

"But you *shook* him!"

"Yes, yes. And now about Mr. Richardson. What were those letters your son mentioned?"

"Nothing. Some anonymous filth."

"How did your son come to read them?"

"Oh, they were addressed to my husband, and Clive stole the keys of his desk."

"But they referred to Mr. Richardson?"

"In the most sensational terms, so much so that we felt we could not keep him on."

"Perhaps I may be allowed to read them."

"I don't suppose my husband has kept them, but I'll go and see, if you wish." She went out of the room, but soon returned with the news, not unexpected by Dame Beatrice, that she could not find the letters. Dame Beatrice gave a non-committal nod and demanded briskly,

"Why does not Clive go back to school, if that's what he wants?"

"I thought I had mentioned that. He is very delicate and very highly strung."

"A very old-fashioned boy," said Dame Beatrice. At this moment Clive flung the door open and appeared as dramatically as an amateur actor making an over-played entrance.

"I burnt them! I burnt them!" he yelled. Dame Beatrice regarded him with benign interest. He stared at her for a moment and then cast himself into her arms.

"Well, really, Clive!" said his mother. Dame Beatrice pushed him, kindly but without emotion, on to the sofa.

"Did you, now?" she said. "Well, you read them before you burnt them. Did they add to the total of the world's knowledge?"

"They were a lot of damned lies," sobbed the child.

"So much is obvious. Be specific," said Dame Beatrice.

"What's that?" He sat up, master of himself again.

"*You* know!" retorted Dame Beatrice, who had learned this cliché from her secretary.

"They said he...well, *you* know!" said Clive, adroitly turning the tables.

"And you know that this was not true?"

"That string-bean!"

"*Really*, Clive!" protested his mother.

"He does not lack stamina," said Dame Beatrice; but whether she referred to Richardson or to Clive, neither the boy nor his mother could tell. Dame Beatrice did not beat about the bush. "How well do you know some people named Campden-Towne?" she enquired of the woman. Her tone was abrupt and compelling. Mrs. Maidston glanced at Clive. His eyes were venomous.

"Campden-Towne? Oh, well, yes, I suppose you might call them acquaintances of ours," she said weakly. Clive made a very rude noise. She ignored it. "Why do you ask?"

"There is some slight evidence that they may be able to shed a little light on Mr. Richardson's activities when he

discovered that a dead man had been placed in his tent. You have read about that, I am sure."

"Well, I don't see what it has to do with us."

"Yes, you do," said Clive. "You sacked Mr. Richardson. That's what she's here about. She just wants to know *why*. It *wasn't* the letters, whatever you may say. You didn't have to *believe* the letters. They were phoney, and you jolly well know they were. You said yourself, a minute ago..."

"Be quiet, Clive! You weren't in the room..."

"No, but I listened outside the door," observed the repellent but pathetic child. "You ought to know me by now."

"Indeed?" said his mother, very coldly, but with a terrified glance at Dame Beatrice. "You are an untruthful, nasty-minded little boy and had better go to your room."

The boy put out his tongue at her and accepted this advice. Left by themselves, the two women faced one another squarely.

Clive's mother fidgeted with a bracelet.

"He's such a little snooper," she said.

"Well, now, why *was* Mr. Richardson dismissed?" demanded Dame Beatrice. "You are not going to tell me that you or your husband would jeopardise a young man's future because of some anonymous comments on his character?... comments which you yourself describe as filthy."

"Well, of course, it wasn't only the letters. He was unsatisfactory," said Mrs. Maidston, hedging.

"As a tutor?"

"Oh, in other ways, too. He was quite disinclined to exert himself in any way which did not take his fancy."

"Such as...?"

"Well, there seemed no reason why he should not have done a little secretarial work for my husband in the evenings, but would he help him?"

"I presume that he would not. Was it agreed beforehand that he should do so?"

"It couldn't have been, could it? Otherwise my husband would have insisted. One would have thought, though, that Mr. Richardson might have stretched a point in order to help out. My husband is a very busy man."

"How *did* Mr. Richardson spend his evenings?"

"In his own room, mostly, using the electric light and the electric fire. Sometimes he switched on his wireless set."

"His own property?"

"Oh, yes, but *our* electricity. It wasn't a battery set, you see. That young man had plenty of perks here."

"How did he and your son get on together?"

"When you speak of Clive as my son, well, of course, he isn't. He is the child of a maid we used to have. It's not a formal adoption. She agreed to let us have him, but since then she has completely disappeared. We've tried to trace her, but without success."

"You wish to adopt the boy?"

"I want to get rid of him. He's uncouth and unmannerly, as you saw for yourself. He's nothing but a tie, and he's so ungrateful for everything that's done for him that he doesn't deserve a good home."

"But he and Mr. Richardson seemed to hit it off, I gather. Why do you think that was?" The woman clasped her hands together.

"I have no idea," she replied. "Clive did not seem to be learning anything and his manners did not improve. In any case, I...there were things about Mr. Richardson of which nobody could possibly approve. When he was not wasting our electricity in his own room, he was disporting himself at the local public house."

"Disporting himself?"

"Beer, darts and, no doubt, flashy girls."

"Ah, yes, no doubt. And the anonymous letters enlarged upon the importance in his life of the flashy girls, I suppose."

"I suppose so, if you care to put it in that way. Anyhow, what with Clive's lack of progress *and* the anonymous letters *and* these public house visits (all too frequent, I'm afraid), *and* his disobligingness towards my husband, *and* the waste of electricity with the consequent expense...well, I ask you!"

"Expense? I suppose, though, that, even allowing for the electricity plus Mr. Richardson's salary, it was a good deal cheaper to keep Clive in tutors than to pay the fees at a preparatory school."

"I have never considered the matter, and I am certain my husband has not."

"I am sorry I could not meet him." Dame Beatrice rose to take her leave. "Thank you so much for receiving me. I have found our talk most informative and have enjoyed it very much."

Clive's foster-mother rang the bell and directed a tousle-haired maid to show Dame Beatrice out. On the drive was the child. He sidled up to Dame Beatrice and cast conspiratorial glances round about.

"Hist!" he said. "Do you read the Bible at all?"

"A most interesting library," she replied.

"Yes, well, what about Potiphar's wife?" He leapt away, but, with a yellow claw of surprising strength, Dame Beatrice collared him.

"Before you return to your room, to which I believe you were sent by your mother," she said, "there is something I should be interested to know. There are two things, in fact."

"I shall please myself whether I tell you."

"Of course, Clive. That is understood."

"You see," said Clive, "I'm a bastard."

"So was the Duke of Orleans at the time of Joan of Arc. He was also a most able general. Then, of course, there is Shakespeare's *King Lear*, in which a bastard is one of the most important characters. But you were saying...?"

"Oh, nothing. What do you want to know?"



"Where you went to school and how you got on with Mr. Richardson while he was your tutor."

"My form-master, too. He saved me from a licking once, for something I hadn't done. He got the push later on, but I don't know why. My people took me away before he went. I was ever so surprised when he turned up here as my tutor."

"Oh, dear! These coincidences!" said Dame Beatrice, disguising her delight at obtaining this valuable information. "Well, good-bye, Clive. I hope we shall meet again at some future time. I suppose you weren't *expelled* from the school, were you?"

"Me? Don't give it a thought. Of course I wasn't. Mind you, I ought to have been, but nobody knew about that...no one at school, I mean, except...well, he took the money all right. I told them at home because I didn't want any mistakes."

"What kind of mistakes?"

"Can't tell you that. I might get into serious trouble. Anyhow, they took them away and I've never set eyes on them since."

"Although you have a key to Mr. Maidston's desk?"

"He didn't put them in there. Oh, well, be seeing you!"

Dame Beatrice let him go and walked briskly back to her car. As she went she gave Potiphar's wife a moment's thought. Nothing could be more likely, she decided. She returned to the hotel, saw Laura, and enquired for Richardson. Laura informed her that the two young men were playing golf and that they expected to be back at the hotel in time for dinner but were unlikely to be earlier than that.

"How did you get on?" Laura enquired. "Any luck?"

"That remains to be seen, child. I think I have established a connection between the people at that house on the heath and those to whose son—foster-son, as it turns out—Mr. Richardson was tutor."

"I suppose Richardson isn't going back there when his holiday is over?—that is, if the police don't pinch him for the murders."

"There seems no doubt that, whether he wishes it or not, his post in that particular household may be filled later on, but not by him."

"They don't want him there any more? He was a menace?"

"He was, indeed." She gave Laura an account of her interview with Clive's foster-mother, and added the various hints provided by the boy.

"Precocious little horror!" commented Laura. Dame Beatrice said that she felt very sorry for Clive, but that there seemed nothing which an outsider, however sympathetic, could do for him, at any rate not for a time.

"Still," she added, "he is an observant child, and I shall be interested to hear how Mr. Richardson reacts to my description of my visit."

This reaction was provided almost immediately. The two young men returned from their golf and soon joined the two women. They were quietly boastful about their prowess on the links, but not insufferably so.

"Well," said Laura, when the flow of reminiscence had died down, "while you've been playing about, Mrs. Croc. has been doing her best for Tom. She's been to see Mrs. X."

"Been to see...?" asked Richardson, looking anguished.

"You heard," said Laura sternly. "She's been to see your last employers, and I'm bound to say, young Richardson, that you don't come out of it very well. What's all this about Potiphar's wife?"

"Oh, that," said Richardson, blushing warmly. "Yes, well, of course, that's exactly what it was. I mustn't bandy a woman's name, though."

"Why not?"

"Eh? How do you mean?"

"Come, now," said Dame Beatrice, intervening in what promised to be a useless and sterile discussion. "We gather that you were faced with a choice."

"I was."

"And that you chose to impersonate Joseph."

"I did."

"And the harvest was anonymous letter-writing by the woman to her husband. I see all that."

"But why did you get the sack from the school?" asked Laura.

"I'd better tell you about that," said Richardson. "It does sound a bit odd to be sacked twice running." He addressed himself to Dame Beatrice. "You see, it all began when I had a difference of opinion with the Headmaster. He wanted me to cane a boy who wasn't the culprit. We had a bit of a toss-up and I came out on my ear. I couldn't give in, because I knew perfectly well that the kid he'd fixed on hadn't done it. Unfortunately, one of the junior masters *had, so*, you see, my lips were sealed. One can't rat on one's fellow-slaves."

"So you left the school under a cloud and were dismissed your post as a tutor under another but a dissimilar cloud," said Dame Beatrice. She cackled harshly, and Laura, who liked Richardson, felt vastly relieved.

"Further explanation is unnecessary," Dame Beatrice continued. "You seem to make a hobby of saving small boys from being caned. However, the little that I have learned from my visits may have had some bearing on the deaths of Mr. Colnbrook and Mr. Bunt. How much longer are you and Denis going to stay at this hotel?"

"On and off, for days and days," Denis quoted facetiously. "Actually, we haven't the least idea in the world. I've no more concerts until November."

"It depends on the police, I suppose," said Richardson. "Anyway, I like it here and I don't want another job (even if anybody would have me) while this business is going on."

“Why did you not tell us that the child Clive had been in your form at school?” Dame Beatrice enquired.

“I didn’t think it important. Is it?”

“Of course it is! It may prove to be the missing link in my chain of evidence.”

“Oh, Lord! I’m sorry I didn’t mention it, if it helps.”

Dame Beatrice leered at him.

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## Faint Gleams of Unexpected Light

*...and on each side were two rows of burning lights, of all sizes, the greatest as large as the highest and biggest tower in the world, and the least no larger than a small rush-light.*

The Brothers Grimm

"So the school may not be such a dead end, you think," said Laura, with her usual shrewdness, "and we're sure the kid was right about Mrs. Potiphar. Well, where do we go from here?"

"I have suggested two moves to the Superintendent. I don't want him to arrest Mr. Richardson just yet, although, unless I can divert him from his present line of enquiry, I am afraid he will do it before long. If merely Mr. Colnbrook, and not also Mr. Bunt, had been murdered, he *would* have arrested the young man by now. It is only because, so far, he cannot find the slightest connection between Mr. Richardson and Mr. Bunt, that he has held his hand, I feel sure."

"I'm still bothered about that change-over of the bodies. Have you any theories about that?"

"Well, the most obvious, although not necessarily the correct one, is that somebody who knew that Mr. Richardson and Mr. Colnbrook had taken a dislike to one another and had quarrelled, must have attempted to prove a connection,

which did not, in fact, exist, between Mr. Richardson and Mr. Bunt."

"That means that somebody was hiding up on the heath near Richardson's tent and nipped in and changed the bodies while Richardson was trying to phone."

"Yes, it does mean that, but it does not mean that my theory is the right one. Another thought might be that Mr. Richardson himself moved the first body and was astounded when he saw the second one."

"But the objection to that is obvious, apart from the fact that it would have been difficult for one person, on his own, to have taken Colnbrook's body to that enclosure. I mean to say, if Richardson moved Colnbrook's body and hid it, why should he phone the police? You'd have thought he'd play Tar Baby for all he was worth."

"That is another hurdle which, so far, the Superintendent has not surmounted. All the same, you know, that woodland walk which the two young men took with the dog..."

"Still sticks in his gizzard? Yes, well, one can see that, I suppose. But you haven't told me what you've suggested he should do."

"I told him that I think the Campden-Townes could well be required to answer a few more questions. I have also told him that I think a description of the couple who stayed at that London hotel might prove very interesting, and I have given him a description of Mrs. Maidston."

"So you don't believe it *was* the Campden-Townes who went to London?"

"They went out of the house, of course, and led the servants to *believe* they had gone to London."

"Where do you think they went, then?"

"It is not possible at present to be precise, but I have an impression that it was not far from here."

"It ought to be easy enough for him to check up on them then. They'd have had to sign the register if they slept

at an hotel."

"There was nothing to prevent them from putting down a false name, child. It would seem the obvious course."

"But, if it was a local place, wouldn't they be known by sight there? They might run into acquaintances or friends, or be recognised by the waiter or the chambermaid."

"Time will show. I deduce that, if they went to an hotel, they must have used a false name because their own name had to be in that hotel register in Kensington and under the required date. Of course, I may be entirely wrong about them, but the Superintendent is most co-operative and certainly does not dismiss my ideas as so much moonshine, so he has consented to see them again. He is also going to talk to Mrs. Maidston."

"About Potiphar's wife?"

"No, no. His approach is to be more subtle, from my point of view, and much more satisfactory from his own, since he will be stating what he believes to be the truth."

"He will tell Mrs. Maidston that some of Mr. Richardson's answers to his questions appear to be incomplete, and he will ask for her assistance in elucidating one or two points which the police believe to be important."

"Such as?"

"He will begin by asking why Mr. Richardson left her service. She will then (I expect) blacken Mr. Richardson's character in some way or another, and then the Superintendent, at my instigation, will refer to Mr. Richardson's dismissal from the school. This should lead to a query about Clive's removal from it. After that the Superintendent will continue the conversation as he thinks best."

"And after that?"

"It all depends, but I have suggested that he might do a great deal worse, now that the school is again very slightly in the picture, than to interview Robinson Borgia."

“What for? *Did* the poisons come from the school, after all?”

“I don’t know, but the Superintendent will be in a better position than I was when it comes to the delicate matter of discussing with the laboratory boy whether anything in the poisons cupboard was ever thought to be missing. Clive, you remember, had done something which the headmaster did not know about; something for which he could have been expelled. It may be a long shot and, in any case, is pure guesswork, to suggest that Clive may have contrived to get hold of the poisons, but less likely things have happened.”

“But—Clive couldn’t be the murderer!”

“No, no. Of course he couldn’t. But, remember, he told them at home because he didn’t want any mistakes. I find that suggestive, don’t you?”

They saw nothing of the Superintendent for the next few days. The young men and Laura played golf or rode over common and heath on hired horses. Dame Beatrice went for long walks and she refused any well-meant offers from the others to accompany her. Sometimes she ordered the car and drove from the hotel to well beyond the Forest boundaries to Wimborne or Winchester, or to Lymington for a trip to the Isle of Wight by pleasure steamer, giving George most of that last day off. (He drove back to Dame Beatrice’s own Stone House at Wandles Parva, at the edge of the Forest, cleaned the car, and stripped down the engine.)

One morning, Dame Beatrice walked along the lovely road from the hotel, cut across the common, and followed the causeway to the tiny wood with its stream and its rustic bridge. She paused a while, to stand on the middle of the bridge and watch the brown and gold of the water in its stumbling run past a tree-trunk which almost dammed its flow.

Then she passed on beside it until she came to an awkward, slightly muddy corner which she had to negotiate



to reach the heath on which Richardson's tent had been pitched. To her right was the stream, which here had turned almost due north. To her left, as she crossed the gravelled road, was the large and lonely house where lived the Campden-Townes.

She strolled over to the stream, no definite purpose in her mind, and followed it along the bank until she came to Richardson's bath-hole. She also came upon an acquaintance who, in company with two small children, was crouching down for the purpose of holding these by the slack of their overcoats while they put little fishing-nets into the water for tiddlers which, if there at all, were not apparent to the naked eye.

"Good morning, Mrs. Bath," said Dame Beatrice. The children's mother looked up, then, hauling vigorously, she jerked her offspring up the bank.

"Why, good morning, Dame Beatrice," she said. "Now, then, Arthur and Baby; it isn't no good you make that fuss. The fishes 'ave took a day off, just the same as we 'ave, and even if they 'adn't, you couldn't of kept 'em, 'cos we didn't bring no jam-jars. (I don't 'old with them carryin' glass about," she added to Dame Beatrice. "Fall down and cut theirselves to pieces, more than likely.) Now, then, Baby, stop that noise, else you'll choke yourself on the sweetie I'm not goin' to give you till you stop your 'owling. And just you come back on the path, Arthur, else you won't get one, neither."

The path was the broad ride across the heath which led to another bend of the stream. They took this track, well away from the water, and while the children frolicked and quarrelled, Dame Beatrice and Mrs. Bath talked.

"You have chosen a very pleasant day for your outing," said Dame Beatrice.

"Came in on the bus. They fair loves riding on the bus. Got to do some shopping when we get back, but time enough for that. They seen the fishing nets in a shop in the

village and nothing wouldn't do but for Arthur to 'ave one. Well, of course, what 'e 'as the baby wants, too, so I 'ad to buy 'em one each."

"You've walked all this way from the bus stop in the village?"

"Oh, no, only from the road that leads to Mr. Campden-Towne's place. He spotted us in the village and stopped his car and gave us a nice ride up to here."

"But how are you going to get back? It's a very long walk for the children."

"Oh, we'll make out all right. Arthur, he's a right manly little walker and I can give 'im a piggy-back now and again while the baby has a bit of a walk."

"Mr. Campden-Towne? I've heard the name. Isn't he a tall, rather thin man who rides a very fine chestnut horse?"

"No, that isn't him. You're mistook, unless he've changed his shape and make and also 'is habits since I left his service."

"I wonder of whom I'm thinking, then?"

"Might be the Colonel, although I wouldn't call 'im *thin*. He's tall, though, and he did have a chestnut horse, now I come to think."

"But surely Mr. Campden-Towne rides? I thought everybody round here did."

"Not 'im. He's what they call a City gentleman. All 'is work's in London and Southampton. He's in shipping—leastways, 'e always used to be in the old days, or so I understood."

"Really? And how did you like working for him?"

"Like it? Well, you don't think about whether you *like* it or not. You just does it, and looks forward to your evening out and your money."

Dame Beatrice was anxious to obtain a first-hand description of Mr. Campden-Towne, although she had seen his portrait, but she did not intend that her anxiety should be obvious, so she began to talk about the children and

enquired whether Mrs. Bath was hoping that they would grow up to be interested in athletics. This led, in the most natural way, to a dissertation on the merits and demerits of the Scylla and District club and to some interesting sidelights on the characters and attainments of its members. Another thought—an idle one this time—struck Dame Beatrice.

“Did you find difficulty in adhering to a training schedule when you were working for Mr. Campden-Towne?” she enquired.

“Bless you, no, Dame Beatrice! I used to go errands down the village twice a week, and soon’s I were out of the ’ouse I used to run. And when I come to the little river I used to jump it from side to side, as many times as I could. That was when I was goin’, of course. Coming back I ’ad plenty to carry, so I used to do weight-liftin’ exercises with the baskets and bags. Oh, training was dead easy in them days. And then, you see, I could always do my press-ups and squats and leg exercises and that sort of thing, in my bedroom. Once the master fell down, dead drunk, just inside the front door, and the missus was ever so worried because she was expecting two people for dinner. I told her not to bother. All she need do was to get one of the others to open the bedroom door wide, Mr. Campden-Towne being a very stocky man, though only five foot seven, and I’d have him on the bed, safe out of the way, in no time, and so I would have done, but she insisted on helping, and I must say she managed very well.”

“And the guests arrived and the dinner passed off quite smoothly?”

“I’ll say it did. Mrs. Campden-Towne telephoned the hotel to a gentleman there she’d met, and asked him over to make a fourth at bridge, the way they’d enjoy their evening. Mr. and Mrs. Maidston was the couple. The other gentleman’s name I never heard, for everybody called him Sidney. (Come on, Arthur! Bring Jennie! We’re turning back

now!) You don't mind if we leave you, madam? I think they'll have had enough by the time I get 'em home."

"Oh, I'll come with you as far as the hotel," said Dame Beatrice, "and then you must come in and rest while I get my car round. You can trust my man, a thoroughly experienced driver. I am interested that you know the people over there." She made a sketchy gesture towards the lonely house. "By the way, who lives in the cottage in the woods and keeps geese?" (The young men had told her and Laura of their ignominious retreat in the face of these enemies.)

"The cottage? Oh, their name's Lovebaker. A very old Forest family they are."

The baby began to tire soon after they had crossed the rustic bridge and were on the causeway. Her mother picked her up and carried her as far as the edge of the common. Here there was a sturdy wooden bench and the chance of a rest. Some farm-hands were rounding up bullocks. Forest ponies were scattered all over an enormous area of grass and nearer at hand some riders, both girls and men, were desultorily whacking a polo ball about. A few people were tracking down the brownish Forest mushrooms. Cars were out on a secondary road which cut the common in two. It ran on into dim blue woods and over a bridge which crossed another stretch of the river before the way turned at right-angles to reach, past glades and the natural Forest trees, the village of Emery Down.

The two children soon tired of sitting on the seat. Arthur announced his intention of catching a pony and taking it home. He made cowboy noises and galloped away. His mother let the baby toddle after him, but the child began to cry as soon as she realised that she could not catch him. Her mother went after her, scooped her up, brought her back to the seat, wiped her eyes and nose, and comforted her with the gift of a sweet.

The ponies took no notice of Arthur, for they were farther off than he had realised and his weary little legs soon caused him to call off the chase.

"Wonder why the figures been going up so much this last two years," remarked Mrs. Bath, watching her son's listless approach. "Arthur's tired hisself."

"Figures?" Dame Beatrice enquired.

"Yes, *you* know. Injured on the roads. Ponies. I see the figures in the paper the other day. Funny enough, it's only the pony figures as 'as gone up. Cattle and deer is down, and the pannage pigs, well, of course, they're seasonal and don't trouble the roads, anyway. You know what I sometimes wonder?"

"No, I don't think I do."

"I sometimes wonder whether the gippoes 'ave got a system."

"A system?"

"For knocking of 'em off. *You* know—stealing 'em. *I* don't reckon all them ponies gets killed."

"But I thought there were strict laws about reporting animals injured or killed on the roads. Do not the bodies have *to* be produced? Are there not people called Agisters with responsibility for such matters?"

"I know nothing of that, Dame Beatrice, but Mabel's husband—the policeman, you know—he will 'ave it there's something fishy going on, and he's a man right out of the Forest, as you might say. It was him as pointed them figures out to me and it was then he said it. 'There's something fishy about them figures, Deirdre,' he says, 'and if *I* was Chief Constable,' he says, 'I'd want to look into it,' he says, 'because the number of motorists booked don't have all that connection with the number of ponies as is missing.' That's what he said."

"Really!" said Dame Beatrice; and she tucked away the information in her memory. "That's very interesting indeed."

“Well,” said Mrs. Bath, getting up from the seat, “I think we’ll be getting along. It’s been ever so nice meetin’ up with you again, Dame Beatrice.”

In spite of the mother’s protests, Dame Beatrice carried the baby back to the hotel. Arthur, sturdy and independent to the last, refused to be helped, but raised no objection to orangeade and biscuits in the hotel lounge. The baby had milk and the ladies coffee, and the porter went to warn George to bring round the car.

As soon as she had seen the family off from the hotel steps, Dame Beatrice rang up the Superintendent. He was in his office and promised to be with her in about an hour. Dame Beatrice invited him to lunch, and told him, with a cackle which disconcerted him, that he need not worry about having to sit at the same table as his chief suspect. She would arrange, she said, for the young men to have a table for two, so that, with perfect propriety, he might join herself and Laura. The Superintendent accepted with alacrity. There was shepherd’s pie on the menu at home.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## Despatches from Three Fronts

*As he handled it he could not help noticing how pliable it was, especially for so strong a rope, and one not in use.*

*"You could hang a man with it," he thought to himself. When his preparations were made he looked around, and said complacently:*

*"There now, my friend, I think we shall learn something of you this time!"*

Bram Stoker

They sat at a table in the window, the Superintendent facing the garden, Dame Beatrice with her back to it, and Laura at Dame Beatrice's left hand. The Superintendent seemed mildly pleased with life, but he spoke of nothing beyond commonplaces until they were taking cheese at the end of the meal.

"We're getting somewhere," he observed. "Do you think they'd let us have that little room again?"

Dame Beatrice said she thought it could be managed, as the retired naval officer who usually laid claim to it was still away. To the drawing-room lounge, therefore, they repaired. Laura bolted the French windows, locked the door (after the porter had been requested to put the *Engaged* notice on the corridor side of it), and the three settled down, with coffee, for what Laura referred to as a nice cosy chat.

Outside the windows the garden showed every sign of autumn. Horsechestnut burrs strewn the grass and the flowers were becoming bedraggled. Every fir tree bore its cones and a vivid creeper was gay with reds and yellows. There were blackbirds on the lawn, but their brilliant summer song had given place to a monotonous and querulous chirping.

"Those birds sing flat," remarked Laura. Dame Beatrice, bolt upright on the only straight-backed chair in the room, asked the Superintendent to enlarge upon his promising beginning.

"You are getting somewhere?" she asked, prompting him.

"We are, I think," he replied. "Acting on your suggestions, we had another go at Mr. and Mrs. Campden-Towne. The gentleman was not at home, but the good lady told me that he was at his Southampton office. I got her to give me the address and telephone number and went there by car. He wasn't there, but I was given the address and number of his London office. I rang up and was told that he was expected but had not arrived."

"He seems an elusive gentleman," Dame Beatrice remarked.

"Yes. Well, as I badly wanted to see him, I thought I might as well kill two birds with one stone, so I went first to that hotel in Kensington where the Campden-Townes were supposed to have stayed, and gave them a description of Mrs. Maidston. She isn't a bit like Mrs. Campden-Towne to look at—as you, Dame Beatrice, will testify—and, in her own way, is quite striking but rather small. They hadn't any difficulty in recalling her. Of course, I referred to her as Mrs. Campden-Towne and then I asked about the husband. Well, the description was of a tall, thinnish chap with a bald forehead. This doesn't fit Campden-Towne, who's about as wide as he's high and has thick brown hair."



"I never did think that visit of the Campden-Townes to London would hold water," Dame Beatrice observed. "It was altogether too opportune."

"That's as maybe, ma'am. I then went to Campden-Towne's London office. By that time he'd arrived. He trades under the name of S. Ponly Ltd. and is in a pretty good line of business, I should think. Everything looked plush. Well, I challenged him, straight to the point. Told him I knew he hadn't been in London on the nights in question—that's to say, the time when the murders were committed and the bodies disposed of. (I was bluffing there a bit, of course.) I asked him where he *had* been at the times stated, and I hinted that I knew more than I'd actually said.

"Well, he's a cagey bird and a bold one. He sent me to the devil, asked where was my authority for questioning him, and told me to prove he wasn't in Kensington when he had said he was. I said I was only asking for his help, but he blew a raspberry at that one and stuck to it that he was being victimised by the police."

"I wonder how phoney his business is," said Laura. The Superintendent shook his head.

"It's all it should be, so far as I can make out from other enquiries I instituted," he said. "I'm afraid we can get no angle there at present, Mrs. Gavin. Still, there's plenty of scope yet. Mind you, I left him a bit thoughtful, I could see that. My trouble is, though, that even if I can prove he never went near that Kensington hotel, I can't prove that he murdered those two men. I've still to establish a connection between him and them, and there's no line of contact at present."

"Would his business link up with protection money?" asked Laura.

"Not unless it's a cover for something illegal," the Superintendent replied, "or perhaps a bookmaking sideline."

"I wonder whether a discreet question or two at the headquarters of the Scylla and District Social and Athletic Club would help to establish the required connection between him and the dead men," said Dame Beatrice. The Superintendent looked doubtful.

"We might try, I suppose," he said. "Well, look now Dame Beatrice, you yourself have already had friendly relations with some of the members, so you might be willing to take on that aspect and save me the job. I am not too anxious to make a police matter of it with the club if I can avoid it. The less publicity my efforts are given, the better it will be at present."

"I had friendly contact with Mrs. Bath again today," said Dame Beatrice. She gave an account of her walk. "I think, from what she told me, that Mrs. Bath might be able to throw a side-light, if nothing stronger, on to Mr. Campden-Towne's business activities."

The Superintendent made a note. Then he said,

"I also went to see Mr. and Mrs. Maidston. My word! That boy of theirs is a coughdrop!"

"Yes. He isn't theirs, of course. They were fostering him with a view to a possible adoption. That boy, Superintendent, was in Mr. Richardson's form at the preparatory school until his foster-parents took him away."

"Was he indeed? That might be worth looking into. What was their reason? Did you gather that?"

"Not from Mrs. Maidston and only obliquely from the boy. By the way, what was the result of your interview with Borgia Robinson? You did go and see him, I take it?"

"Oh, him! A nasty bit of work if ever there was one! Actually suggested he should *sell* me his information! *Sell* it me! I soon told him where he got off, and, of course, I've still got to check on what he told me. I suppose you've guessed what that was, ma'am?"

"Well, it is nothing but guesswork, as you suggest, but my guess would be that he told you about the missing

poisons—the hydrocyanic acid and the potassium cyanide.”

“Dead right. Mind you, according to him, only a small quantity of each was missing, but enough to provide more than one lethal dose. He as good as accused Mr. Richardson, but, in spite of what I think, I took him up very short on that, and told him to be careful what he said. All the same, he’d said it.”

“Yes, of course he would. He has read the newspapers. No, Superintendent, I am pretty sure who it was who obtained possession of the poisons, and it was not Mr. Richardson. I am convinced that it was the child Clive, probably as the result of a ‘dare,’ or possibly to give himself a sense of power. I think the wretched Robinson found out about it, or, much worse, sold Clive the poisons and then put pressure on the boy. The boy, who has a keen sense of *saufe qui peut*, appealed to his foster-mother to be taken away from the school and so out of Robinson’s clutches, and, as his wishes sometimes seem to be law...he probably threatened to run away if she did not take him away...”

“I see. Could well be, of course.” The Superintendent rubbed his jaw. “But even if, through the boy, we could trace possession of the poisons to the Maidstons, it wouldn’t help us much if the couple were safely tucked away in a Kensington hotel at the time of the murders, would it?”

“Well, first things first,” said Dame Beatrice, refusing to play to the gambit. “I will tackle the members of the Scylla and Distict club and see whether there is anything there to help us.”

“One trouble,” said the Superintendent, “is that, so far, we haven’t a clue as to where the murders took place, nor can we find out what the men were doing up to the time of their deaths. Only one thing seems clear. Going by the medical evidence, they must have died at pretty much the same time and that means it was likely they were together when they took the poisons. If the murderer hadn’t been fool enough to move the bodies, we might almost have

expected the coroner's jury to suggest it was a suicide pact."

"Unlikely, in my opinion, Superintendent. But with reference to the murderer's foolishness, doesn't it occur to you that he *had* to move the bodies?"

"You mean the place where they would otherwise have been found would have given away the identity of the murderer, ma'am?"

"Exactly."

"And you think they would have been found at Campden-Towne's place?"

"No, but I think they might have been found on the back seat of his car."

"In the back of his car? But..."

"I should not be surprised if you found that he and his wife entertained the two young men at whichever house or hotel they patronised while they were supposed to be staying in London."

"And the poison was administered there? Too dangerous, surely? The two men might have dropped dead in the hotel. That would have taken some explaining."

"I envisage something more in the nature of a stirrup cup, after they were all in the car."

"Two flasks, you mean, one for the Campden-Townes and the other for the victims? The difficulty there, ma'am, is that two different, although, I suppose, related poisons were used. They'd have needed *three* flasks."

"I do not think the point need trouble us at present. Let us take the broad view. And, speaking of the broad view, what did you make of the Maidstons?"

"Well, they denied that they stayed in that London hotel, but I don't think they've got anything more to hide except, as you say, concerning the boy. Your suggestion that he may have pinched or purchased the poisons I find very interesting, but we've yet to prove it, and I don't like frightening kids."

"I agree, and on the major issue of the murders I do not think we shall need to involve the boy. On the other hand, if we can trace those poisons to him, we may be in a strong position to find out what happened to them afterwards. The Maidstons and the Campden-Townes seem to be very close friends."

The Superintendent said nothing, but drummed on the arm of his chair. Dame Beatrice realised what he must be thinking, but she waited for him to speak.

"Of course, ma'am," he said at last, "you do see that, if the lad was in Mr. Richardson's form at school, and got hold of the poisons, it is more likely, on the face of it, for Mr. Richardson to have confiscated the stuff and so got it into his possession, than that the foster-parents found out about it and took it away from the lad, don't you?"

"I admit the possibility, Superintendent," replied Dame Beatrice blandly. "Schoolmasters do confiscate the dangerous, illegal, or irritating property of boys. You would have to prove, however, that Mr. Richardson knew that Clive had possession of these lethal substances. Besides, there is the evidence supplied by the boy himself."

"A first-rate little liar I should class him as," commented the Superintendent sourly. "Anyway, ma'am, if I might involve you a little deeper in the affair, I'd like to suggest that you undertake another enquiry at the school. You are known to the Headmaster and would find him less difficult of approach, perhaps, than I should. Prompted by you, a question or two from him to the other boys who were in Clive's form at the time should establish whether Mr. Richardson could have known that Clive had the poisons in his possession."

"You regard me as impartial in this affair, Superintendent?"

"No, ma'am. I know you're all out to put Mr. Richardson in the clear, but I also know that you won't tamper with the truth."

“Hear, hear!” said Laura unnecessarily. Dame Beatrice nodded.

“Very well,” she said. “The Scylla shall be my wash-pot and upon the Headmaster will I cast out my shoe. What is more, I will pay another visit to the Maidstons and will find out, if possible, whether Clive did take samples from the poisons cupboard in the chemistry laboratory and, if he did, what happened to them. I intend to promise the child diplomatic immunity if he betrays guilty knowledge of the exploit.”

The Superintendent looked a little doubtful.

“I don’t want to put wind up the little so-and-so,” he said, “but, of course, do as you like, ma’am. It all comes under the same heading, I suppose.”

“That angels can rush in where—er—the police fear to tread,” said Laura. “May I come with you on these expeditions, Mrs. Croc. dear? Only to be in the car, not to be present at the interviews.”

“Your presence will be a solace in the case of disappointment, an inspiration if I meet with success,” Dame Beatrice replied.

The Superintendent unlocked the door and bowed the ladies out.

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## War on Four Fronts

*"Poison, poison!" she murmured, and threw the food in handfuls to the foxes, who were snuffing on the heath.*

Rosa Mulholland

The most logical sequence, Dame Beatrice decided, would be to visit the school first, then tackle the Maidstons; after that she could interview a selection of the club members and (an addition to the list and one which she had not mentioned to the Superintendent because she had not thought of it at the time) Richardson himself.

The Headmaster received her a little coolly and listened, with a worried pucker between his brows, while she outlined her case. When she had finished, he pulled open a drawer in his desk and took out a thick and handsomely bound tablet.

"My record book," he explained. "I find it very useful for references of this kind. Maidston? Maidston? Here we are. *See under Topley*. Yes, yes, I remember. A foster-child, although hardly one of silence or slow time." He glanced up at Dame Beatrice to make sure that she appreciated the delicate jest.

"Hardly a Grecian urn, either," she remarked. The Headmaster smiled, pleased to note that his witticism had not gone astray.

“No, no. Rather an ugly little boy, I always thought,” he agreed. “Nothing very classical about him. His Latin was deplorable. Now then. Came to us September ’60, removed at end—no, he didn’t even complete the term, and, as the required notice of removal was not given, no fees were repayable—removed May ’62. Letters home mostly discontented in tone but not sufficiently so to be censored by masters on duty at letter-writing periods.” He looked up again. “We try to be liberal-minded where the boys’ personal correspondence is concerned. Well, now, you suspect that this boy abstracted a small but lethal quantity of matter from the poisons cupboard in the chemistry laboratory. May I ask you to particularise?”

“You are asking, I think, for evidence of a kind which I do not possess.”

“Then on what are your suspicions based?”

“On a number of inter-related facts which, I hasten to add, do not, of themselves, involve the boy. If I can show that he did abstract the poisons, it might help the police and it might (or might not) help Mr. Richardson, who, at the moment, is under a considerable cloud. I firmly believe him to be an innocent man and I am anxious to lift this cloud of suspicion under which he lies.”

She gave the Headmaster a *résumé* of the case against Richardson. He let her finish without interruption. Then he said,

“I am a firm believer in justice and, although I was a little angry with Mr. Richardson before he left here, I most certainly do not envisage him as a poisoner. I will do as you ask, provided that I myself do the questioning. If I do it inadequately, in your view, you will oblige me by jotting down a note and not by voicing your opinion in front of the boys.”

“Very well. It is good of you to be so co-operative.”

The Headmaster nodded, got up and walked to the big time-table which occupied half of one entire wall of his



study. He consulted it, then held the door open for Dame Beatrice, followed her out, adjusted the card, which had been marked *Engaged*, to the position in which it read *Out*, and led the way to a classroom. Fifteen boys stood up. The Headmaster waved them to their seats and turned to the master-in-charge.

"Excuse my interruption of your lesson, Mr. Sprott," he said. "I wonder whether you will leave the boys to me for ten minutes or so? I will send to the Staff Common Room for you when I have finished with them."

"Thank you, Headmaster," said young Mr. Sprott, going gaily off to the staff-room for an unexpected cigarette.

"Spence, a chair for Dame Beatrice. Where are your manners, boy?" said the Headmaster to a blameless child at the end of the front row. "That's better. Now, boys (including Radcliffe, who seems chary of according me his undivided attention), I want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth..."

"So help me God," added the form funny-man, *sotto voce*

"...and it will be the worse for any boy who chooses to conceal from me anything he may know or suspect. *Now!*" One or two boys, conscious, no doubt, of recent sin, turned pale, and on the whole classroom there descended that breathless hush which is more often associated with major rows in schools than with school cricket matches. "You, in this form, have all done two years of chemistry. You have all seen the outside (at any rate) of the poisons cupboard. Well?" There was respectful agreement from the form. "Now I come to the point. Stand up, any boy who has ever noticed that the key of that cupboard has been inadvertently left in the lock."

Not a boy moved. The Headmaster scanned in turn the fifteen faces in front of him. His gaze returned to the face of the form captain. He raised his eyebrows. The boy blushed and then slowly stood up.

"Please, sir," he said.

"Well, Hawkins? Come along. Speak up. There is nothing to be afraid of."

"Please, sir, I don't remember ever seeing the key left in the lock, but we—we *were* once shown inside the cupboard, sir."

"Well, that's all right. Just part of Mr. Joliffe's chemistry course, no doubt. And then the cupboard was locked up again. Is that it?"

"Not—not exactly, sir."

"Oh?"

"It wasn't Mr. Joliffe, sir."

"Who, then?"

"The laboratory assistant, sir. *He* showed some of us the poisons. It was one wet dinner-time, sir, when we couldn't be out on the field. But he did lock up again and he didn't leave the key in the lock."

"I see. Thank you, Hawkins. You have done what you can to help. Stand up, all the boys who were with Hawkins when that poisons cupboard was opened." Five children, looking vastly relieved at hearing their leader commended, however grudgingly, by the Headmaster, rose to their feet. "Now, has anybody anything to add to what Hawkins has just told me?" A small, pale boy shuffled his feet. "Yes, Resthall?"

"Borgia told us he had enough poison in the cupboard to do in—to kill the whole school, sir."

"*Who*, boy?"

"Borgia, sir. The lab assistant, sir."

"Then don't call him by foolish nicknames. His name is Robinson. Is that all you have to tell me?"

"Sir, yes, sir."

"Very well. You and Hawkins may sit down. Now I want the rest of you boys to concentrate very hard. I don't wish anybody to use his imagination or to 'think' he knows. You must be absolutely certain. Each boy will search his memory

diligently. It is of the utmost importance. Was your former fellow-pupil, Clive Topley, among your number when the poisons cupboard was opened?"

"Yes, sir," murmured the polite voices.

"Hawkins?"

"Yes, he was, sir."

"Resthall?"

"Please, sir, yes, sir, I think so, sir."

"I see. Now we come to the hub of the matter, and there is no need for you to attempt to shield anybody. You are to tell me the truth. Sit down, you boys. My question now concerns everybody in the form, those who saw the cupboard opened and those who did not. Is there any possibility that any of you, including, of course, Topley, could have obtained access to that cupboard at any time, apart from the time I have been told about?"

There was almost unbearable tension in the room. Fifteen pairs of mesmerised eyes were bent upon the Headmaster. Then a boy raised his hand. The Headmaster raised his eyebrows inviting the child to speak.

"Please, sir, I don't know about access, sir, but Topley did once show me two test-tubes with corks on the end, sir, and told me they had poison in them, sir."

"Good heavens, boy! Did you not report this to Mr. Joliffe?"

"No, sir."

"Why ever not?"

"I didn't believe Topley, sir."

"I see. Was any other boy shown these test-tubes?"

Unwilling hands came up all over the room. "Well, really! Had *none* of you a sufficient sense of responsibility to report so grave a matter?" One by one the hands dropped.

"Hawkins?"

"Well, no, sir. Topley was always—always—"

"Boasting?"

"Yes, sir. You could hardly believe anything he said, sir. He said he opened the poisons cupboard with a hairpin, sir."

"Indeed? Well, go on, boy."

The unhappy form captain lowered his eyes.

"Well, you couldn't, sir."

"No, I believe that I could not."

"Please, sir, I mean *one* couldn't, sir."

"Then why not say so? You mean you yourself tried to do this?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you in a position of *trust*?"

"Please, sir, it wasn't that, sir. I...I thought, if it was possible to do it, I ought to tell Mr. Joliffe, sir, so the lock could be changed or something."

"Oh, I see. I beg your pardon for doubting you, but, another time, boy, do not carry out rash experiments. You might find yourself in serious trouble."

"No, sir. Yes, sir."

"Now, a last question, Hawkins—and here there need be no hesitation. Did any master, at any time, impound or confiscate those test-tubes?"

"No, sir. Topley never brought them into class. He kept them in the dorm, sir."

"*Dormitory*, boy. I dislike these moronic shortenings. Dormitory, not dorm. Laboratory, not lab. Chemistry, not Stinks." There was a nervous, ingratiating titter from the form at this, except from the funny-man who, under cover of the sound, muttered, "Mucous, not snot, you clot." The Headmaster having restored himself to good temper by his own little jest, sent Hawkins to the Staff Common Room for Mr. Sprott and, having enjoined silence upon the rest of the form, combined with an admonition that a pious study of the textbook was desirable until Mr. Sprott should arrive, he took Dame Beatrice back to his study.

"What did you think?" he asked.

"I have an open mind," she replied. "There is nothing to show whether Clive did or did not contrive to obtain possession of the poisons."

"Exactly my own opinion."

"I am most grateful for your help. There is just one more thing, if you will be so good."

"Certainly."

"May I have a word with the art master?"

"I will send him to you in here. Am I permitted to ask...?"

"Of course. I want to find out when he last used potassium cyanide."

"Potassium cyanide?"

"Etchers employ it. I thought perhaps he might have done so."

"Oh, yes, I see. And, of course, there are always wasps' nests," said the Headmaster helpfully. As it turned out, there was nothing to be gained from the art master, an exquisite young man in brown corduroy trousers and a bright blue smock with lots of paint on it. He did not appear to be in the least surprised by Dame Beatrice's questions.

"Used the stuff? Yes, of course I have. You have to bite an acid into the metal, you know. Have I ever used it here? No, I haven't. You don't usually teach etching to kids. Knew Joliffe had got it in his lab? Never thought about it. How little can you know about the way the other man lives?"

Dame Beatrice went off to interview the Maidstons. This time she was lucky. Mr. Maidston was at home. He was in the drawing-room practising tapping a golf ball into a teacup which was placed on its side. He was a tall, thin man with charming manners and a somewhat foxy smile. His wife was arranging bronze chrysanthemums in a heavily gilded, extremely ugly vase. There was neither sight nor sound of Clive.

Dame Beatrice came to the point at once by telling them that she had just come from the school. Involuntarily

they exchanged glances, then Maidston said,

“Oh, yes? In what way, Dame Beatrice, should that concern us? Our foster-son left the school, at my request, a good many months ago.”

“In one sense it does not concern you at all,” Dame Beatrice replied in equable tones, “except in so far as it may (quite indirectly, of course), concern Clive.” The Maidstons again exchanged glances. “You see,” she continued, “I have learnt a rather disturbing fact, and so has the Headmaster. It seems that, while he was at the school, Clive informed the other boys that he had managed to obtain possession of a small quantity of hydrocyanic acid and another of potassium cyanide from a cupboard in the chemistry laboratory.”

“He did bring home a couple of test-tubes with some stuff in them,” admitted Maidston, after a slight pause. His wife drew in her breath sharply, but her husband’s steady eyes did not waver. “He did not tell us what was in them and he did not show them to us. My wife found them under some clothing in the tall-boy in his bedroom. She brought them to me without the boy’s knowledge and we threw them away because she was afraid of broken glass among his things. Of course, we certainly never thought of them as containing poison. We simply supposed them to hold the results of some experiment or other which had been carried out in one of the chemistry lessons and which the boys had been allowed to keep.”

“Although I wouldn’t put it past Clive to have kept the test-tubes, whether with permission or not,” said Mrs. Maidston, who appeared to have received some sort of cue from her husband. “He’s a very naughty boy at times and very disobedient. I’m afraid he also tells lies.”

“He asked several times to be taken away from the school, I believe,” said Dame Beatrice. She had no direct evidence of this, but the Headmaster’s reference to Clive’s letters home had given her that impression. Mr. Maidston nodded, and his wife observed,

"He said the other boys didn't like him. He was bullied, he said, and got into trouble for the misdeeds of others."

"We didn't believe him at first," put in Maidston. "I remember saying to my wife that, if anybody did any bullying, it would be Clive, and that, if anybody got another boy into trouble, it would again be Clive."

"In the end, though," said Mrs. Maidston, "the letters got so hysterical that we were forced to believe him."

"So we took him away. It's been a great nuisance, of course. Had to pay a tutor. Turned out to be a real young rogue. Don't wonder he was dismissed his post at the school. Didn't know what he was like when we took him on, but found out soon enough and he had to go," said Maidston.

"Ah, yes, you refer to Mr. Richardson. I understood that Clive liked him, though."

"He *would!*" said Mrs. Maidston. Dame Beatrice wondered what Clive had been up to since her last visit.

"I suppose you will eventually find another school for him," she said, "as the tutoring was so unsatisfactory."

"Oh, he's no longer with us," said Maidston. "Did you not notice how peaceful everything is?"

"Not *with* you?"

"No. His mother, a former servant of ours, came along a few days ago and demanded the boy back. Said she was now married and that her husband was prepared to have Clive live with them. We tried to persuade her that we could do a great deal more for the boy than she could, but she wouldn't be convinced. In fact, she became extremely abusive to my wife—I was not at home at the time, unfortunately—so my wife asked her to wait while she telephoned me and as soon as I heard the story I agreed that the woman should take the boy away. There seemed nothing else for it, and really, as my wife will tell you, Clive had been such a little pest and nuisance, since the tutor

went, that I was not altogether sorry to see the back of him."

"I asked the girl for her address and said we should like to keep in touch—write to Clive, you know, and send to him for Christmas and his birthday, take him out sometimes, all that sort of thing—but she refused to give me her address and told me, very rudely, to mind my own business," said Mrs. Maidston.

"I see. Have you *no* idea where he has gone?"

"I have not. It could be Southampton or even London, or, of course, it might be one of the villages round here. I couldn't do more than *ask* for the address, could I?"

"How long had you had Clive? Since babyhood?" asked Dame Beatrice.

"Oh, *no!* I couldn't possibly look after a *baby!* I told the girl before she left us to go into hospital to have the child, that if she put it into an orphanage until it was old enough to wash itself and so on, I would consider adopting it, whether boy or girl. I heard from her again when Clive was six. Well, I went to see him and it was arranged that we should have him on trial with a view to adoption later."

"We have had him for nearly four years," said Maidston. "It was only my wife's kind heart and my own rooted objection to giving in without a struggle, which caused us to keep him so long. Actually, as I have indicated, it was a great relief to me to come home the other evening and find that the boy had gone. Of course," he added with some suddenness, "Richardson could have known about those test-tubes you mentioned. He had complete charge of the boy for several hours a day."

"Ah, yes," said Dame Beatrice. Maidston narrowed his eyes and asked,

"What *is* all this about the test-tubes, anyway? It couldn't by any chance, have anything to do with the inquest on those two chaps found dead in the Forest, could it? I read about that in the local paper."



"A most curious affair," said Dame Beatrice. "Yes, you have made a correct deduction." Maidston raised his eyebrows questioningly, but she did not say anything more. She thanked the couple for having accorded her what she described as a fruitful interview and took leave of them. Maidston, however, insisted upon seeing her to her car and said, on the way out to the drive, "*Is* young Richardson involved more deeply than we know?"

"There is no reason to think that he was responsible for murder, especially as you took care to destroy the poisons Clive brought back from school," Dame Beatrice tartly replied.

"I'm still very doubtful whether the test-tubes contained poisons, Dame Beatrice," returned Maidston, "All the same, if *Clive* could get hold of poisons at school, what was to prevent *Richardson* doing the same?" he added. "After all, he was a master there and so in a position, I suppose, to help himself to the stock."

"How right you are. Well, good-bye, Mr. Maidston. I hope we shall meet again."

"Good-bye, Dame Beatrice." He stood on the steps to wave as the car moved off. Dame Beatrice drove straight to the hotel for lunch. She had decided slightly to alter her previous plan of campaign and to tackle Richardson next. Laura had remained in the car, as she had suggested, during both the visits and had been given an account of each. When they got back, Laura, under instructions, did some telephoning and then took Denis for a short walk while Dame Beatrice had a private session with Richardson.

Richardson seemed nervous, she thought, when told of her plan. He also seemed surprised when she said she had visited the school again, and when she added that she had followed up her encounter with the Headmaster by going straightway to interview the Maidstons, he was moved to protest.

*"They wouldn't do much to help me. On the contrary,"* he said. *"We parted brass-rags, you know, although they sent me a full month's pay."*

Dame Beatrice agreed that she did know, but that the Maidstons had been very helpful indeed, although not, perhaps, in the way that they had intended.

"But I can't go into that at the moment," she added. "My comments must be reserved for the Superintendent."

"That bloke is still out to get me," said Richardson lugubriously. "He really believes I'm guilty, and there's no way I can think of to prove to him that he's wrong."

"My interviews gave me a pointer or two, if it is of any comfort to you to know it."

Richardson was cheered up miraculously by this remark and lost his embarrassed and nervous manner.

"I say," he exclaimed with some eagerness, "that means you're still on my side!"

"I am on the side of truth. I do not claim to be on the side of justice, because there is no such thing, as every schoolboy knows. Even the Almighty, we are told, has a slight bias in favour of mercy, and the mystical poet Blake goes even further and suggests that we pray also for pity, peace, and love. You recollect the passage, perhaps?"

"Yes," replied Richardson, "but what's that got to do with it?"

"Almost nothing. I pity the child Clive and I would be prepared to extend mercy to him. To connect him with peace and love is beyond my scope. One thing I can, and will, tell you about him. The Maidstons have given him up."

"Given him up? I thought the little perisher was the apple of Mrs. Maidston's eye. It certainly seemed like that when I was there."

"She seems to have altered her opinion. What I want you to do is to give me as clear an account as you can of the time you spent there, and then I want you to answer one

question. I do not wish to sound dramatic, but I want you to answer it as though you were on oath."

"Heavens!" said Richardson, with a return of his former nervousness. "That sounds most fearfully sinister."

"Never mind. Just you fire away. Oh, one point before you begin. Have you any reason to think that Mr. Maidston is, or was, connected in any way with the Scylla and District Athletic and Social Club?"

"Not that I know of, but the only real contact I had with that club was in competing against them, and, of course, my two rows with Colnbrook. Both were individual events, so to speak, if you remember, so the club, as such, didn't come into it except at the feed they gave us, and Maidston certainly wasn't present at that."

"How did you obtain the tutoring post?"

"Mrs. Maidston wrote to me. Of course, I didn't realise that Clive was the kid in question. He was always called Topley at school."

"So I was told by the Headmaster. It seems an extraordinary coincidence that Mrs. Maidston should have answered your advertisement out of the many others there must have been to choose from."

"Well, it wasn't so much of a coincidence, really. Young Clive had heard from a pal of his at school that I'd left, so he asked the Maidstons if he could have me to tutor him."

"Who told you this?"

"Mrs. Maidston, in her letter."

"Did Clive confirm this?"

"I didn't ask him and he didn't mention it."

"I see. Now, tell me all you can about the time you spent there, not omitting the reason for your leaving."

Richardson told his story. There was nothing sensational about it. He glossed over the incident which had led to his dismissal by stating that Mrs. Maidston had "made a bit of a pass" at him and then had represented him to her husband as "a sort of seducer and so forth," and that Mr. Maidston

“naturally took her word for it, and I wasn’t prepared to give her away.” There had been some anonymous letters, too, Richardson had learned from the boy, but these had not been mentioned to him by the Maidstons.

“Now,” said Dame Beatrice, “for my question. Don’t look apprehensive. I think I know the answer, but I should like confirmation from you. Did you know that Clive took home with him from school two test-tubes containing chemicals?”

“Yes, of course I did. He showed them to me. He was terribly pleased with them. Told me the stuff was deadly poisonous. I jollied him along by pretending to believe him, but, of course, I didn’t. I mean, apart from everything else, how could he get at stuff like that?”

“From the poisons cupboard in the chemistry laboratory, perhaps.”

“Oh, no, that’s fantastic. That’s where that idiot of a Superintendent thinks I got it from. It’s laughable. You couldn’t get into that cupboard with a pick-axe, and the Stinks man was never the sort to leave his keys about, or take any risks of the kind.”

“I see,” said Dame Beatrice. “What happened to the test-tubes?”

“I imagine the Maidstons confiscated them. The kid was in the devil of a bate when he found they were gone. I suppose he told the Maidstons what he’d told me, and Mrs. Maidston got wind up and thought it might be true.”

“Did Clive name the poisons?”

“Yes. It *is* a bit odd, now one comes to think of it, that they should be the very same poisons...”

“Yes, it does,” said Dame Beatrice, with a fearful and wonderful leer. “In fact, I would go much further than that. I would say that coincidences, in this particular case, are in danger of making themselves appear absolutely ridiculous. In other words, the child’s claim that he had brought home

hydrocyanic acid and potassium cyanide cannot be disallowed."

"But how on earth *could* he have got hold of the stuff?"

"From Borgia Robinson, of course. So much is perfectly clear. It is yet to be discovered why Robinson let him have it. According to the evidence I obtained through the Headmaster, Clive knew that the poisons were there. He had even seen them. I think he bribed Robinson, obtained a small quantity of each and then was blackmailed by him. I think that is why the boy was so anxious to get away from school. Now let us talk of shoes and ships and sealing wax and whether pigs have wings."

"And if by pigs you refer to that repellent kid, poor, miserable, unlucky little blighter," said Richardson, suddenly cheering up. "You have my entire sympathy. He's a little heel, if ever there was one. Let's go and see whether the bar's still open. I could do with a good stiff drink."

"Yes, of course. The child was fond of you, in his way, you know. Well, when we have had lunch, I shall tackle the Scylla club again. Would you care to come with me?"

"Yes, if you'd like me to. One thing, there's no chance of running into Colnbrook again. Why *do* you think somebody moved his body from my tent and put Bunt there?"

Dame Beatrice did not answer. She led the way to the bar, bought Richardson a cocktail and herself a glass of sherry and, as soon as lunch was on, they went into the dining-room, where Laura and Denis joined them at table.

"How did the telephoning go?" Dame Beatrice asked. "You rang up the secretary?"

"Not helpful. All they did was a good bit of cross-country running," Laura replied, "and we knew that, didn't we?"

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## Peaceful Encounters

*"What now?" he said, addressing his horse, which hearing the ripple of water, and feeling thirsty, turned to a wayside trough, where the moonbeam was playing in a crystal eddy.*

*Shirley*  
Charlotte Bronte

"Cross-country running?" said Dame Beatrice. "That fits in very nicely, as you say, with what we already know. Did you manage to obtain details?"

"Not so that you'd notice. I rang up the secretary of the Scylla and District. He had just got home for his lunch, so he wasn't too pleased at being kept from it. I put it to him as you'd told me to, and that's as much as I gleaned. Oh, and I made an appointment for you with Miss Calne. How can she help?"

"I cannot tell at present, but I hope that my visit to her will open up a wide field."

"I wish it would open up a *clear* field," said Richardson. "I'm sick of being the Superintendent's stool-pigeon."

"Be of good cheer," said Denis. "If I do not misinterpret the smug leer on my great-aunt's countenance, you are in the clear already. What about it, great-aunt?"

Dame Beatrice wagged her head, but would not commit herself.

"Do I come with you to see Miss Calne? I fixed four o'clock for your interview," said Laura.

"No, you won't want another session of waiting in the car. If I judge Miss Calne aright, I shall most certainly be invited to take tea with her."

"Then I'll go to the riding-stables and hire a hack, when I've seen you off."

"No, no, please do not wait. Away you go! It is no distance, as you know, to Miss Calne's house from here, so there will be a long time to wait before I go, and if you stay here with me you will miss the best of the afternoon."

So off went Laura to hire a horse and, the two young men having been bidden to go away and play golf, Dame Beatrice was left alone. She wondered whether her visit to Miss Calne would prove abortive. If so, there remained the club secretary, who would be certain to have the information she required. She preferred, however, to deal with the trustworthy ex-schoolmistress rather than with a young man who could hardly be expected to keep to himself that which she would have to disclose to him (by inference, even if not in so many words). There was another reason, too, for choosing Miss Calne. Her house faced an open common.

She decided to walk, as the distance to be covered was short and the late September afternoon was clement. She arrived punctually at four o'clock. Roses were still blooming in Miss Calne's small garden, and as Dame Beatrice reached the door, which was at the side of the house, her hostess appeared, holding a bouquet of the aromatic blooms.

"I thought that, as you are staying in the hotel, you might like a few flowers for your room. I've vases I can lend you," she said, when the greetings were over. "I'll just put these into water to keep them quite fresh, and then we'll have our tea and (I do hope) a nice long gossip."

They went into the house and Dame Beatrice was given an armchair and a new magazine while Miss Calne busied

herself in the kitchen putting the roses into water and making the tea.

"Now," said Miss Calne, when two kinds of bread and butter, a plate of scones, some home-made jam, meat paste, some chocolate biscuits, and two kinds cake were on the table, "what can I do for you, Dame Beatrice?"

"I am not at all certain that you can do anything," said Dame Beatrice, accepting a dice of brown bread and butter, "but you *may* be able to help me. Do you happen to know the name of your predecessor?"

"As president of the Scylla and District Club? Yes, of course I do. He was a Mr. Sebastian Campden-Towne and he lives in that big house on the borders of the heath. You can't see the house from here because the trees along that road leading up to the common hide it, but it is over there." She gestured.

"I have seen the house," said Dame Beatrice, "and I was hoping that you would give me Mr. Towne's full name."

"Yes, the club members always called him plain Mr. Towne. It reminded me of the Headmaster at my last school. A new member of staff turned up with the double-barrelled name of Finlay-Hopkinson, but the Headmaster ruled, 'Either Finlay or Hopkinson, young fellow, but not *both*, in *my* school!' I don't really blame him."

Dame Beatrice cackled.

"He probably saved the young man from a certain amount of impudence from the boys," she remarked.

"But why, if I may ask, does Mr. Towne come into the picture?" asked Miss Calne.

"Is he a friend of yours? Do you entertain kindly thoughts concerning him?"

"I don't really know a great deal about him. He is an arrogant, self-made man and thinks school-teachers very small beer."

"Then I will tell you all." This she proceeded to do. Miss Calne was enthralled and delighted. Without being asked,



she promised to keep secret the disclosures.

"I feel most honoured," she said, "to be the recipient of these confidences, Dame Beatrice, and, for what it's worth, (probably very little), I can tell you something else. From my front windows, as you can see, I get a very good view of our Lawn."

"This part of the common, you mean?"

"Oh, no, Dame Beatrice! This kind of open country is known as a Lawn. This one is Gurkha Lawn, so known because Gurkhas were encamped on it during the war. There was an attempt, some time back, to re-name it, but the local people fought for the name and won. I was canvassed and I voted to retain it. The Gurkhas are such gallant little men."

"And is Gurkha Lawn germane to the issue?"

"I don't really know, but the men you mentioned—Colnbrook and Bunt, you know—trained on it and were always spying out the lie of the land through field-glasses."

"Interesting. Did they appear to be looking at anything else, besides the lie of the land?"

"Oh, yes, of course. They studied the ponies, but, then, anybody would, you know. They're so picturesque and charming."

Dame Beatrice left at five o'clock and returned to the hotel to find Laura enjoying a late but very substantial tea.

"Oh, hullo, Mrs. Croc., dear," said her secretary. "Did you have a good time? I'll ring for some tea for you."

"I had a very beautiful tea at Miss Caine's," said Dame Beatrice, "and that means I had a good time. Besides, Miss Caine, having had, I suppose, a certain training in such matters, is an observant and reliable witness. How did you enjoy your afternoon?"

"Very much indeed. Having collected the horse, I rode eastward towards Beaulieu and turned off soon after I had passed that little pond with the geese and things. You know, I still can't make head or tail of the local geography. I was

certain I was headed towards Lymington, but, by the time I thought of branching off again, I realised that I was coming back on to the common here."

"Yes, the roads make the shape of a letter Y."

"Then the maps are wrong! Never mind. I went along on the ambling nag (as somebody says somewhere) until I came to a path which led up and down, and here and there, but always giving a view that I could recognise."

"Yes?"

"Well, I didn't recognise personages by name, so to speak, but I did spot some lassies all got up regardless, in vests and running shorts, out for a training spin."

"Indeed?"

"So I rode over, always anxious to push along any kind of physical effort, and stopped to chat with them."

"I see. And the upshot?"

"Well, a bit of evidence which may lend colour to our view."

"This is most interesting. I hesitate to prophesy, but are you not suggesting that there has been an attempt to recruit successors to Mr. Colnbrook and Mr. Bunt?"

"I don't know how you knew, but that's a fact. Shall I tell you all?"

"Please do. So far, all I know of the Scylla and District club is what I have learned from Miss Calne, Mrs. Bath, and from the secretary and the unhelpful doer of good works—all this apart from what Mr. Richardson has told us, of course. How did you know that these girls were members?"

"Well, I didn't, but I thought it was worthwhile to take a chance, so I rode athwart their tracks, as I could see they were slowing down, and asked the way to Boldre. I then offered them cigarettes and we fell into conversation. The subject of the murders, sponsored by me, came up, and then we all adjourned to the local, less than a mile away. To show goodwill, I dismounted and trotted beside the nag

while they spread out and jogged alongside. All girls together, if you take my point.”

“You have the enviable gifts of friendliness and tact, dear child.”

“Take it as read. When we got to the pub it was too early, of course, for drinks, but the landlady was awfully good and let us into her own part of the house for coffee and lots of beef, cheese, sardine, tomato and ham sandwiches, so we had those and then some hard-boiled eggs and some pickled onions.”

“Good heavens, child!”

“Oh, we enjoyed them, you know. Then it was—after we’d had the pickled pork and piccalilli—that I began to get the gen.”

“It is not often,” said Dame Beatrice, “that I feel faint but pursuing. Pray go on.”

“Stay with me. The pursuit won’t take all that long. Anyway, to retrieve our *mouflons*—for I feel we’ve gone over the top and are a very long way from the common or garden sheep—what I learned was as follows. Far from Colnbrook and Bunt being rivals, they were very good friends and were associated in what Dulcie—couldn’t get at any of their surnames, but I don’t suppose that matters—called ‘a sort of a fiddle, only nothing really to do with the club.’ What do you make of that?”

“Just what I made of it before.”

“Yes. Well, I tried to winkle out some more information, but, although the girls were willing to be co-opted, I don’t think they knew very much. They spoke of one Corinna, Dulcie’s particular team-mate. They’re the first-and-second string hurdlers. Dulcie was inclined to be disparaging about Corinna. Said she had tried hard to be Colnbrook’s ‘steady’ and had pretended to be cut up when she heard about his death.”

“But Dulcie did not believe this?”

"Quite definitely did not. Said she thought Corinna was really a bit scared of Colnbrook, whom Dulcie diagnosed as a nasty bit of work, and that Corinna was more relieved than distressed when she heard he was dead."

"What did the other girls think?"

"Oh, they agreed with her. Anyhow, those mostly concerned were a couple of club milers named Judy and Syl. They had been what they called 'approached.'"

"By whom? Did they say?"

"Well, they giggled a good bit and said 'no names, no pack-drill' and that was about as much as I could get out of them. A man was involved—that was obvious—but when girls begin going all girlish there's not a lot one can do. I didn't like to suggest any names myself. One needs to be careful about giving that sort of lead. One other thing did come out. There was good money to be won if they fell in with this proposition—whatever it was—and we can guess—but they all agreed that 'a fiddle wasn't really worth it.' I gathered they meant it might endanger their amateur status, and I wouldn't be surprised if that turned out to be true. There's almost nothing you do in athletics that *doesn't* endanger your amateur status. An awful lot of rot really."

"So it was the mile runners who had received this offer," said Dame Beatrice. "Did the girls know whether any of the male athletes had been approached?"

"I gathered that none of the men had received the offer—at least, not so far as the girls knew."

"Yet the ability to run a mere mile does not sound to me a sufficiently important qualification for what I suspect was required of the successors of Mr. Colnbrook and Mr. Bunt."

"Oh, if you run a mile in competition on the track, you're capable of jog-trotting a considerably greater distance than that in training, don't you think? Of these girls, one was a hurdler and two were two-twenty sprinters but they were taking the outing with the milers and all seemed in pretty good shape. Cross-country training spins

needn't be all that strenuous. It's not as though there's anything competitive about them. I mean, you can slow down and walk, if you want to. Think of Colnbrook and Bunt with their field-glasses."

"I see. Did you gather *why* the girls, and not the men, had been approached?"

"No, but I rather thought that the men might have jibbed at the idea of being murdered. May simply be a wild guess, of course."

"Were the names of Mr. Colnbrook and Mr. Bunt mentioned to the girls when this mysterious offer was made to them?"

"Not in so many words, but there aren't many flies on the lasses these days. They'd read between the lines all right. There wasn't any doubt about that. They knew Colnbrook and Bunt had been mixed up in something fishy and they desired no part in it. Now, your turn. What did Miss Caine have to say?"

"Without any prompting from me, she remarked upon the fact that Mr. Colnbrook and Mr. Bunt often trained on the Lawn opposite her house and watched the Forest ponies through field-glasses."

"Adds up, doesn't it?"

"I thought so. We had the same evidence from Mr. Richardson and then, of course, there is the discrepancy between the number of motorists known to have run down straying ponies and the number of ponies reported missing."

"That seems a bit complicated to me. What about hit and run drivers? Such menaces do exist, you know."

"I should like another meeting with Mrs. Bath. I must get her to introduce me to her sister's husband."

"The p.c.? Good idea."

"I shall also have a word with the Chief Constable."

"What would you like me to do?"

“I know what I should like one of us to do, but I fear it would be difficult to manage.”

“Excelsior! Lead me to it!”

“I will tell you what is in my mind, but that, I think, is as far as we shall get. I wish we had some means of contacting the Forest gipsies and of gaining their confidence.”

“Nothing easier. You know that riding-stables I hire from while we’re here? Well, the three girls who run it know a gipsy who owns a lorry and takes the foodstuffs and things for their horses. Lots of the Forest gipsies have settled down now, you know. They live in cottages and have cars instead of caravans, but they’re gipsies all right and very proud of it. The one I’m talking about lives along the same road as your Miss Caine, and you can bet your life that anything *she’s* seen *he’s* seen, and he’ll know a whole lot more about it than she does. It’s too late to go over there tonight, but first thing in the morning I will sally forth and find out what I can. I doubt whether I’ll be able to tackle the bloke direct, because they tell me he’s as shy as a fawn and as cagey as an old dog-fox. I shall have to tell the girls what I want to know and why I want to know it. Will that be all right? Mind you, they may not have the information I need.”

Laura’s self-imposed errand on the following morning took her to the riding-stables at just after nine o’clock. The stables were attached to a large, decrepit old house on the edge of a bit of common just beyond the water-splash and Laura reached them after a good ten minutes of rapid walking.

Mucking-out had not begun when she arrived, for the string had not yet left the stables, but two of the owners were swilling down the yard and the scent of breakfast which came from the house indicated that the third and oldest of the three was doing the cooking. Laura offered to man the pump, a welcome suggestion, it seemed, and, with two buckets going instead of one, the job was soon concluded.

"Coming in for some breakfast?" asked one of the girls.

"I'd like to come in and natter, but I've just finished breakfast, thanks."

"Oh, well, come in for a cup of coffee, then. If you want a mount, you can have one at ten for an hour. We've got everything hired from eleven onwards, unless you'd like to make it three o'clock this afternoon."

"All right. I'll make it three o'clock, then. When I leave here I've got to get back to the hotel to make a report to my boss."

"She isn't doing a stint for the R.S.P.C.A., is she? If so, you can give us a clean bill. No starvation rations, no over-tiring, no unkind treatment and the vet always on the end of the telephone."

"No, seriously. I need some information and I don't know how to get it unless you can help me."

They went into the house and the two girls took chairs at the table in the shabby dining-room while Laura lounged on the broad, cushioned window-seat. Breakfast was brought in, coffee poured, and when the plates had been cleared by the hungry girls, and cook, helping herself to marmalade, said, "Now, Mrs. Gavin, at your service."

"Thanks," said Laura. "Well, you know that ancient lorry which brings your feeding-stuffs and what not from Lymington?"

"We do. It's driven by a man named Lee. Nobody but a gipsy could persuade that contraption to move. I don't know why they're such wizards with worn-out machinery, but they are."

"Centuries of make-do and mend, I suppose. Anyway, it's the gipsy I want to talk about."

"He doesn't tell fortunes. That's his mother, old Dosha Lee."

"He keeps his eyes open, though, I take it," said Laura, ignoring the lighthearted reference to fortune-telling and

forcing a serious note. "Does he take much interest in the Forest ponies, do you know?"

"He daren't—not in the way you mean."

"I wasn't thinking of that, but you've hit the target, in a way. We have some reason to think that somebody—a syndicate, perhaps, is more likely—is knocking off some of the ponies and taking them out of the Forest for sale elsewhere. Mind you, we have very little to go on, but that's what we suspect."

"Well, but why should *you* worry? You don't own any of the ponies, do you?"

"Look here, if I tell you a bit more, will you swear not to breathe a word to a soul unless I say you may? Dorothy? Miriam? Angela? It's serious."

They nodded and looked impressed.

"Cross my heart."

"Till death us do part."

"See this wet, see this dry."

"Right." Laura leaned forward and in low tones told them as much of the story as they needed to know.

"But who do you suppose is at the head of this pony-snatching?" Miriam demanded. She was the cook-house-keeper and the financial genius of the undertaking.

"I can't tell you that at present. It wouldn't be fair. We have our suspicions, but proof is hard to get. That's why I wondered whether your gipsy can help us."

"It doesn't seem to me that you're on very safe ground in thinking that ponies *have* been stolen out of the Forest," said Dorothy bluntly. "It would be a frightfully difficult thing to do if you're thinking in big numbers, as I suppose you are. They're under all sorts of protection. There are the Commoners who own them, the Verderers, the Agisters—I don't see how anybody could get away with wholesale stealing. Look here, Mrs. Gavin, Angela's got a book all about the Forest and the rights of the Commoners and so forth, so we do know what we're talking about. We're



Commoners ourselves, actually, although we don't bother much about it."

"Let me lend the book to you, Mrs. Gavin," suggested Angela. "When you've studied it, you'll see how next to impossible your idea is. The only person who could get away with it, so far as I can see, would be one of the Agisters, or a very close friend for whom he'd wink the other eye, but, even then, only for a limited time, I'm sure."

Laura's enthusiasm was dimmed.

"Then you don't think it's much good trying to find out whether Lee has spotted anything suspicious?" she asked. "Anyway, I'd like to borrow the book. I'll be back for my ride at three."

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## Liberty Lee

*There are plenty of traditional gypsy names in the Forest families; men's names such as Liberty, Eli, Nelson, Job, Goliath, Freedom, Samson, and the surprising "Dido." Women's names often show their Indian origin: Vashti, Dosha and Genti, and they show a preference for the more old-fashioned Britannia, Ambrozina, Lavinia, Urania, Eliza, Harriet and Caroline.*

Juanita Berlin

Laura took the book back to the hotel, made her report (such as it was) to Dame Beatrice, and then took the book into the garden and sat in a wicker chair, in the kindly September sunshine, with the intention of putting in a period of intensive study. Dame Beatrice left her to it and made up the dossier of an interesting but not difficult patient from case notes supplied by her London clinic.

At twelve noon the young men, who had been playing golf again, returned to the hotel and lugged Laura into the bar.

"What were you so absorbed in?" Denis demanded. Laura showed him the book. He examined the list of contributors, looked at the illustrations, read the foreword

and handed it back. "Made anything of it?" he asked. Laura nodded.

"I *think* I've got a clue from it," she said. "Mine's a whisky and splash, please."

At lunch Dame Beatrice asked no questions and Laura volunteered no information except to state that she had hired a mount from the riding-stables for a three o'clock jaunt and would be back for tea. At two-forty, booted but not spurred, she set off. Her mount was ready for her and she rode at walking pace towards Beaulieu. Then she turned off, still thinking deeply, in the direction of what Miss Calne designated as the Lawn.

Liberty Lee's cottage was on the way to the Lyndhurst-Boumemouth road. He was at home, as his wife, herself a gipsy, admitted at once.

"Liberty, you're wanted," she said. Liberty came in with the careful, carefree tread of the gipsy. He was dark-haired and of a brown countenance which might have been derived from his racial ancestors or merely from an open-air life. He had the high cheek-bones and the air of independence of the true gipsy, took a stance slightly impudent, and asked Laura what she wanted.

"Co-operation," said Laura.

"Yes, miss?"

"Look, how would you get ponies off the moor unless you were their owner or some other accredited person?"

"Get ponies off the moor? You mean the Lawn or else the common."

"All right. I know *you* don't do it, but how could it be done?"

The gipsy studied her. Suddenly and unexpectedly he smiled.

"That's telling," he said.

"Two men have been murdered for taking ponies."

"Not they. Only for talking in their cups about it, maybe."

"Quite likely. But *how is it done?* I had an idea it might be connected in some way with people who can handle the stallions. What's the answer, Mr. Lee?"

"There's no answer I can give ee," said Liberty Lee. "Best you go and ask my mam."

"I'm asking *you*. But, if you don't want to answer it doesn't matter. I thought you might be able to help, that's all."

The gipsy stared at his shoes and Laura realised that, so far as he was concerned, her errand was over. She remounted and rode over the Lawn and beside a narrow path which led to the enclosure in which Richardson and Denis had come upon the body of Colnbrook. She did not open the gate, but took a broad path over a wooden bridge and rode on, giving the horse a loose rein, into the open forest. Giant beeches, interspersed with age-old oaks, made the path a wandering one. The horse took his own way while Laura bent her brains to the task in hand, that of convincing the obviously knowledgeable gipsy that he ought to help her.

A nagging thought, not for the first time, assailed her. Were the missing ponies really worth the deaths of two men? Was there not a piece of the jigsaw missing?

She ambled on, or, rather, the nag did, until they reached an open, grassy stretch bordered by two shallow, natural ditches. Here the horse stopped to graze. Laura slid off his back, looped the reins over her arm and surveyed the scene at leisure, moving as the horse moved, but never checking his enjoyment, until she decided that he had had his share of the herbage and that it was getting on for her own tea-time.

She remounted, stirred him into action, and they had retraced about three hundred yards of their outward route when she had to pull up to allow a lorry to turn out of the gates of another enclosure on to a broad path which led across a bridge on to the common. Before she got going

again, she saw the gipsy. He was riding one of the Forest ponies, whether his own property or not Laura was in no way able to determine.

Laura challenged him.

"Hey, where do I find mushrooms?"

The gipsy smiled.

"Anywhere you like, lady, once you get on to the common. The Forest mushrooms be all about there." He rode on. Laura knew better than to follow him and attempt to resume conversation. She returned her horse to the stables, satisfied that, whatever was in the wind and whatever he knew or guessed, the gipsy was not prepared to talk.

"How did you get on?" asked the girl to whom she handed over the horse.

"Only so-so," Laura replied. "I came away nearly as wise as I went. No comment. I thought we were going to get somewhere, but we didn't."

"Too bad. Didn't he say anything at all?—not that I really thought he would. Although he's no longer a traveller—very few of the Forest gipsies are—he's a true Romany still, and they don't give away anything to strangers."

"So I believe. He did say one thing, but I couldn't tell whether he was serious or merely pulling my leg."

"If there was likely to be any money involved, you can bet he was serious. The gipsies don't beg, but you can count them in if there's any chance of making any sort of a sale."

"Well, I suppose you could reckon it as such. He advised me to go and see his old mother. I suppose he wanted me to have my fortune told, and that would mean crossing her palm with silver, if nothing more."

"I should go, if I were you, Mrs. Gavin."

"You would?"

"Certainly I would. It's the only way to get any information out of the gipsies, unless they really get to know you and trust you. Start with two bob, and see how you get

on. She's sure to want more, if she's really got anything to tell you."

"I met Lee again while I was out riding."

"Was he on foot? I'll bet not!"

"No, he was on a Forest pony."

"He's a genius at catching them. He's got the knack of talking to them. He can do anything with *our* horses, too. Never known him have the slightest difficulty with any of them. We had to get rid of a biter last year, but he'd literally eat out of Lee's hand. It was quite fantastic, if you knew the horse as we did."

"Where do I find this old lady?"

"Oh, she lives with her son and his wife. Go back there, when you've got time, and ask Mrs. Lee about her, if Lee is not back home."

"Would it be all right to go there after I've had my tea? I'm absolutely starving."

"Sure it will be all right. His wife's name is Eliza. She isn't out of the Forest. She comes from Dorset and he says she misses the travelling, especially when her family comes roving over this way. His mother, old Mrs. Lee, is named Dosha."

"I see. Well, thanks very much. I shall certainly seek her out."

She returned to the hotel to find Dame Beatrice and the two young men in the television lounge, where most of the guests took tea. It was a large, pleasant room, partly formed by having had an extension built on to the original house. This extension had an enormous window overlooking the garden and it acted as a sun-lounge during the day and could be heavily blacked out when the television set was turned on during the evening.

As soon as Laura had washed and changed, Denis rang for tea. Richardson asked her how she had enjoyed her ride. The fact that he was still at liberty, and was also free of the Superintendent for a while, had restored his spirits, and he

listened attentively while Laura described her afternoon. He shook his head, though, when she said that she had hopes of obtaining information from a gipsy fortune-teller.

"They just make the stuff up," he said. "My mother went to one once and paid the usual two bob and was told she had the usual 'lucky hand', and then the gipsy said that if my mother would fork out another five shillings there was plenty more she could tell her, all of it very important indeed. Well, of course, Ma didn't fall for that one, so I'm blessed if the gipsy didn't pick up her hand again and tell her that she had a mean, cheese-paring nature, and no sympathy or kindness in her heart."

Laura laughed. She did not linger over her tea, excused herself to the others, went upstairs for a coat and then strode off to the gipsy's cottage. Lee was not at home, but Eliza, a dark-skinned girl in a red satin blouse and wearing enormous earrings, asked her to come in when she heard her errand. The cottage was clean and smelt of stew, and old Mrs. Lee was in the room in which the family lived and ate. There was a well-scrubbed kitchen table in the room, supporting a bird-cage containing two budgerigars. Two little boys, bright-eyed and dirty-faced, were having a wrestling match on a brilliant hearthrug made from "pieces" and an elderly woman in a rocking-chair stirred them occasionally with her elastic-sided boot while her brown fingers were busy weaving a basket.

The girl spoke to her in a mixture of English and Romany, and the old lady, who was dressed in a dark-grey skirt and a black blouse with an orange-coloured scarf at the throat, looked Laura over and, shaking her head, made an assertion in the Romany tongue and, getting up out of the rocking-chair, motioned Laura to take a seat at the table.

"I'm sorry, lady," said the girl. "I want she should take you into the front room, but she says there's no fire in there, and no more there isn't. Nelson, and you, Goliath, out of the way." The boys took not the slightest notice of this

command, so she picked one up in each arm, bundled them into the garden, and bolted the back door. "That way you will have some peace," she said.

Laura took the seat indicated, a wooden chair, the old gipsy sat at right-angles to her in a similar one, and the girl settled herself in the rocking-chair. The fortune-teller extended an earth-coloured palm, Laura laid on it a two-shilling piece, the gipsy bit the money and put it aside, and then reached out for Laura's hand.

"Right-handed, keck-handed?" she asked. Laura admitted that she was right-handed by nature, but was ambidextrous in everything except writing. It was her right hand which the gipsy had grasped. She put it down and took Laura's left hand instead. For a full minute she stared at it, then she reached out for the other hand and silently compared the two. "Yes," she said at last. "You have a lovely nature. You are faithful and true. You have a good husband. His work often takes him away from home. You have no home of your own, but you share two homes with another woman, a woman much older than yourself. She loves you very much, but she never speaks of loving, either to you or anyone else. You have a beautiful child."

Laura, who would have thought this the last adjective to employ in describing her son, laughed loudly.

"You wouldn't think so, if you knew him," she said, "but the rest of what you've told me is quite right."

"Yes. Why have you come?"

"You know as well as I do. Two men have been murdered in the Forest and an innocent man has been under suspicion—still is, so far as I know. I want the real culprits brought to book, and you must help me."

"Must? I don't take orders."

"It wasn't an order. It was a cry from the heart. Won't you help me?"

"Yes. You have a hold over me."

"Indeed, Mrs. Lee? In what way?"



"You come from the north. I see mist and mountains. I see islands and lakes and the sea. I see an old woman, much like me, who can foretell the future. I see life and death in her eyes."

"My grandmother had the Gift. We call it that in the Highlands. What else can you see?"

The old woman looked at her and held out her hand, dropping Laura's in order to do so. Laura, who considered that she had received *very* good value for her two-shilling piece, produced a pound note. The gipsy shook her head. Laura returned the money to the handbag she had laid upon the table and took out a five-pound note. The old woman drew it towards her.

"I see you are serious. I knew you were," she said. "Put the twenty shillings beside it." Laura obeyed, although she felt that she was being mulcted of more money than the séance was probably worth, but the gipsy's next words reassured her. "When I have finished, you will give me one or the other. You have a generous heart."

"I must have, mustn't I?" said Laura, grinning. "Can't I tell you what it is I want to know?"

"My son has told me what you want to know. You want to know why two men died because of the ponies. If I tell you, you will be in great danger, although it may be not yourself, but your beautiful son."

"That will be a change, at any rate."

"You still wish to know?"

"Of course. My second name is Tammás Yownie. Nothing will be allowed to fickle me."

The gipsy smiled politely, but did not ask to have the reference explained. She said,

"You should ask the policeman to explain himself. The ponies are not destroyed on the roads."

"So he was *right*! He said that more were missing than had ever been destroyed on the roads. But why would a rich man need to steal ponies?"

"Because," said the gipsy, "he could *buy* them only in August, September, October, and then he would need to buy too many. Also, they would still have to run in the Forest until he needed them, because he has nowhere to keep them. That is all I can say, and I do not know the man's name." Her fingers closed over the five-pound note. "You will know more when the danger threatens, so—beware!"

"I see. Well, thanks very much, Mrs. Lee."

"The stallions roam. Nobody can name the father of a Forest foal. When the mares are in labour, the sires are far afield. They roam. If it was not for their markings, nobody would know whence they come. The gentlemen know their own, but only because of the markings."

"Tell me one thing," said Laura. "Is anything involved besides the ponies?"

The old woman stood up, claimed the rocking-chair by a gesture to her daughter-in-law, sat down in it, and stowed away the five-pound note. Her daughter-in-law stood by the table beside Laura and then picked up the pound note. Laura nodded. The young woman opened the back door and the two gipsy children rushed in and immediately fell upon one another like a couple of warring fox-cubs. At the same moment the front door opened and Lee came straight through into the room where the others were assembled. He said, straightway, to Laura.

"Did you get what you wanted, my miss?"

"I'm not sure," Laura replied.

"How much did you pay?"

"Six pounds, altogether."

"Foolish, very foolish," he said softly. "And what is there in it for me?"

"You'll have to ask your women-folk. I'm cleaned right out, I'm afraid."

"Good enough. Good night to you, then," Politely he escorted her to the front door. Laura was surprised to find that it was half-past six by the time she got back to the

hotel. She went into the bar, expecting to find the others at their favourite table in the window, but they were not to be seen. She went up to Dame Beatrice's room and found her employer playing a complicated game of Patience on the little writing table.

"What-ho, Mrs. Croc., dear!" she said. Dame Beatrice looked up.

"I hope your mission was more successful than mine," she said.

"Your mission?"

"Yes, I went to visit Mr. and Mrs. Campden-Towne, but the servants reported that they had gone away, leaving no address and giving no indication of a possible date for their return."

"Guilty conscience, do you think?"

"It is not possible to say. How did your session go?"

Laura described the séance.

"I can't say it seems to have been much good, and I did rather feel I'd paid through the nose," she said, "but I suppose it was rather interesting. The old lady isn't entirely phoney, but I wish she could have been a little more explicit. Still, we mustn't grumble. What do you make of it all?"

"I think we must see the Superintendent again and suggest that he interview your young policeman, and, in view of the gipsy's warning, my dear Laura, I am in mind to deport you to London, and Hamish too."

"Over my dead body!" said Laura stoutly. Dame Beatrice cackled.

"But your dead body is the one thing I wish to avoid," she said. "Perhaps we will *a//* go home."

"Leaving the case in the air?"

"The case is not in the air. The gipsy has supplied the last clue. One thing I did while you were gone. I advised the Superintendent of Clive's disappearance and got him to check the Maidstons' story. It would never do for harm to come to the child. Once they know the police are suspicious,

the boy should be safe enough. The Superintendent has promised, in your favourite phrase, to leave no stone unturned in looking for the child, so I think we may set our minds at rest concerning Clive."

## Second Interlude

*Discourse of the Unnatural and Vile Conspiracie.*

King James VI of Scotland

“Cor, look!” said Judy, as she and Syl plodded around a rather ill-equipped indoor arena. “Marlene done five foot four.”

“Them bars sags,” said her friend. “Don’t suppose it was a bit more than five two and a half, actually. What did you make of that Mrs. Gavin?”

“Her? Might make the half-mile if she trained.”

“No, but her herself, I mean.”

“No idea. All I got was that she was no sort of a square. She’s got what it takes, whatever that is. Sticking her neck out, though.”

“What makes you think so?”

“Look,” said Judy, changing stride as three of the other women athletes challenged their possession of the track, “what I mean is, she’s got on to something. You can’t get away from the fact that them two boys was done to death.”

“Nothing to do with Mrs. Gavin. Couldn’t have been.”

“It’s none too healthy for amachers to go about digging into cases of murder. Much better leave it to the police. It’s their job, anyway.”

“Let’s shove up a couple of hurdles and have a bash. I’m sick of jogging. My heels is getting sore. What do the club have to pay for the honour and privilege of being allowed to use this ruddy old dump?”

"Dunno. Got to pay our own bus fares to get here, anyway."

"Oh, well, it's only one night in the week. The men gets two."

"That's three nights out of seven for me and Sid. I don't see why they boys and we girls can't train together."

"The boys would hog the whole track and all the fixings. We wouldn't get a look in." They put up three low hurdles and conversation died as they took turns at going over them. Members of the city club which owned the indoor track began drifting in, dancing on their toes and giving obvious signs to the visitors from the Scylla and District that time was up and that they required their premises to themselves.

"I bet the showers are cold," said Judy, as they stacked the hurdles and then went off to change.

"I'm not going to bother. Have a bath when I get home," said Syl. "I haven't done enough to get really sweated. An hour's not much at a time. The bus ride takes longer than that, counting here and back, not to speak of that walk up the lane."

They left the premises at a quarter-past eight and had three-quarters of a mile to walk to the bus stop, back in the town. They traversed a narrow, lonely, tree-lined road which had no pavement, and were about half-way along it when they heard the sound of a car. They had been walking side by side, but, as there was scarcely room for two cars to pass, Syl slipped in behind her friend as they approached a bend in the road.

Suddenly brilliant headlamps glared into the girls' eyes. Completely dazzled, Judy fell into the ditch. The car tore at her. Syl screamed and jumped into the hedge. The car swerved, the brakes squealed, the driver pulled up. The girls picked themselves out of hedge and ditch. A man got out of the car and came up to them.

"You're lucky," he said shortly. "Keep your eyes skinned another...why, hullo! It's Miss Gammon and Miss Crimble, isn't it? Sorry, girls, but you *were* rather all over the road, you know. Any damage done?"

"I'm wet and muddy, Mr. Towne," said Judy. "Lucky no more damage."

"I'm all over scratches and I'll bet my nylons have had it," said Syl. "And we *wasn't* all across the road, Mr. Towne."

"Oh, well, I'll take your word for it. Thought any more about what I asked you? The pay's not bad, you know."

"Still thinking," said Judy. "Well, we'd better be getting along. Catch my death in these wet things."

"I'll give you a lift in my car."

"No, thanks all the same. We better keep moving. Anyhow, you ain't going our way."

"Oh, there's certain to be a gate where I can turn the car. You carry on, and I'll pick you up and drive you home, if you tell me where you live."

"Thanks a lot, but nothing doing. Good night, Mr. Towne. We'll keep on thinking about your other offer. We might accept if it wasn't for what happened to you know who."

"But, my dear girl, that was nothing to do with me, or with the job they were doing for me. What on earth silly ideas have you got in your heads? Whatever they are, you'd better get rid of 'em pretty damn' quick! Think it over."

"Didn't mean anything personal, Mr. Towne. You know that. Well, good night again. If you want to turn the car, you'll have to go near enough up to the sports club place, I reckon."

"O.K." He walked back to his car.

"Come on," said Syl, beginning to step out.

"Prepared to sell your honour dearly, dearie?" asked Judy, falling in behind her.

"Don't know what you mean. Old Towne ain't *that* sort."

"I'll tell you what sort he is. He's a stinking murderer. I reckon he was out to get us. That swerve was no accident;

no, nor it wasn't careless driving, neither. *And* he isn't sozzled. I got a very keen nose for that sort of thing, and there wasn't no smell to his breath."

"You're cuckoo! Why would he want to get *us*? We ain't done nothing!"

"We've turned down that offer to watch out for them roaming ponies, haven't we?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I don't exactly know. What say we crash the hedge? I don't want him having another go at us. He might be lucky the next time."

"You got the jitters? Well, all right then, if you want to. One thing, I'm in such a perishing mess already, I can't look much worse than I do. Hope it's not that fresh conductor-boy on the bus. If it is, he's bound to pass remarks. He always do, give 'im half a chance!"

"Half a mo! There's a gate a little way ahead. Let's trot. He'll be back any minute."

They trotted, found the gate and tumbled over it. They walked uncertainly on the rough ground but were immediately screened from the road by a high hedge of hawthorns.

"Duck down, and let him go by," said Syl, as they caught the sound of a car. It passed them at less than twenty miles an hour as they crouched in the shadow of the hedge.

"Looking for us," said Judy. "We can get on now." They hurried on as fast as they could. "Don't suppose he'll turn the car again. Let's get back on to the road. It's quicker that way. Cor! These thorns!"

"Don't try it. We'll get torn to pieces. There's sure to be another gate further on."

The bus conductor proved to be not the youth they dreaded, but a cultured, quiet West Indian, who might have been surprised by their dishevelled appearance, but who



was far too courteous to appear to notice it. The bus stopped at the corner of Judy's road. Syl had further to walk.

"Come in our house. Mum'll give us a hot drink. Then me and my dad'll see you home," said Judy kindly.

"Shall you tell them about Mr. Towne?"

"I better. Towne'll guess we will, anyway, and it's protection to tell. He won't dare do nothing to us if he thinks other people know."

"You don't *really* think he done it on purpose, do you? Tried to run us down, I mean."

"I'm not taking any chances, I know that. I shan't go to the stadium any more for a bit. I'm going to stay in the bright lights and walk on a proper pavement. What's more, I'm going to phone that Mrs. Gavin in the morning. The shop steward has arranged so we girls can phone up our hair appointments in the tea-breaks, and this is a damn sight more important than a hair-do, although I shall tell Len Parker that's what I want the phone for."

"Nothing's more important than a hair-do, but you're lucky to be able to phone from the factory. I can just see *our* old cat's face if anybody suggested it to *her!*"

There was a short silence until Judy said,

"I s'pose you noticed he cottoned on at once when I said (naming no names) about Bert Colnbrook and that there Bunt? He didn't need no telling what I meant."

"I don't think that's much to go on. You sure your mum won't mind if I come in for half a tick? I don't want to go home alone."

# CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

## Hamish Rides Again

*Thou little Child, yet glorious in the might  
Of heaven-born freedom on thy being's height,  
Why with such earnest pains dost thou provoke  
The years to bring the inevitable yoke,  
Thus blindly with thy blessedness at strife?*

William Wordsworth

Laura was surprised and pleased when she took the telephone call at half-past ten on the following morning. It was only by chance that she had stayed in the hotel, for the young men had invited her to accompany them to Christchurch and she had debated with herself as to whether she should go. Dame Beatrice had urged it and this had released Laura's natural fund of obstinacy. When the post arrived, however, she felt that she had done well. A letter from her son Hamish clinched the matter and reinforced her decision.

"Coming down for the week-end," wrote Hamish. "I thought I was to ride a New Forest pony, but you have said no more about it, so I am going to gate-crash you. Daddy took me out on Rotten Row. It is rotten all right and I saw lots of ladies. None of them could really ride."

Laura passed the letter over to Dame Beatrice, who chuckled over it and remarked that Hamish was a braw wee

laddie. Laura winced, and proffered the dictum that braw wee laddies were the curse of the universe.

"I am awful at Latin," Dame Beatrice read aloud, "and the vicar says I am terrible at Greek, so I shall study Russian when I go to school next autumn, also Chinese and American, with an eye to my future, so I am sure to be all right except for an unlucky atomic bomb or two. You will be dead by then, so there is no need for you to worry. Love, Hamish. P.S. School will be good. Shall *exterminate* the masters."

"Good Lord!" said Laura. "Why did I have to bear and rear such a monster?"

"Hamish shows a fund of common sense well beyond his years," said Dame Beatrice. "The child has put the present-day problem in a nutshell. We shall survive or we shall not. It is just as simple as that. When do you expect him to arrive?"

"Goodness knows! Anyway, he's quite capable of finding his way to this hotel, whether Gavin is with him or not. What really interests me is not Hamish but these girls who've telephoned me."

"Yes?"

"They think they've been attacked. They say that Campden-Towne's car tried to run them down. It *could* be possible, I suppose. Of course, they had been got at to take the place of Colnbrook and Bunt and had turned the issue down. So much I gathered from the talk I had with them when I met them on the common. There is something beyond the actual theft of those ponies, you know."

"I know it well, child, but, so far, we do not know what it is. Have you any ideas on the subject?"

"So far, no," said Laura regretfully.

"Well, we await the arrival of your son. I must say that I enjoy the company of Hamish. He is a most refreshing child."

"He gives me cold feet," said Laura. "I hate the sight of him."

That this was not altogether a misjudged view of the situation was apparent when Hamish, lugging a medium-sized suitcase, appeared at the hotel on the following morning.

"I've come," he announced at the office window, "because my mother needs help. Have I a bedroom or something?"

"What name?" asked the office, a trifle suspicious of the youthful, would-be guest.

"Gavin, of course. You've a Mrs. Gavin staying here, haven't you?"

"Yes, we have. Are you her son?"

"What else? My key, please." The office dangled the key, but did not hand it over. "And another thing," said Hamish, "I don't want early morning tea. It vitiates the membranes. I bet you didn't know that, did you?"

"No, indeed. Thank you for the information," said the office, inwardly amused.

"Oh, somebody has to take the mickey out of someone, so you've done it out of me," said Hamish, tolerantly, "but I believe in my own beliefs. Somebody has to stand up for these angry young men, you know. They can hardly be expected to stand up for themselves, can they? For one thing, you have to know how to do Judo, or, even better, to have all those Commando tactics. Personally, I always find it better to jump on a person's feet and then uppercut him, if he tries any funny business. Did you ever try that?"

"Your key," said the office, defeated. Hamish accepted the key in an attitude of doubt, and then foiled the intention of the porter to carry his bag upstairs.

"I don't tip," he said, "so I can't expect you to worry."

"Part of my duties, sir," said Barney.

"You shouldn't have to wait on *children*, anyway."

"I assure you it's a pleasure, sir, but just as you wish."

"All right. I'll carry it upstairs myself. You see, I shall be an Independent when I'm an M.P."

"The Independents are a small body, speaking numerically, sir."

"Little snow, big snow. Big snow, little snow," said Hamish. "I think that's a North American Indian proverb, but, whether it is or is not, it contains a beautiful and fundamental truth."

"Yes, sir?"

"If iddy is umpty, then what is iddy umpty iddy?" asked Hamish.

"You're too young for girls at your age," said the porter, hitting back, "and you need a wash and brush up, sir, before you meet your mother."

Hamish studied him.

"Do you know, I think you've won," he said. "All boys are dirty. I am a boy, therefore I am dirty. Any argument about that?"

"Certainly not, sir," said the porter. "That would make a syllogism, no doubt."

"Yes, you *have* won," said Hamish. "Right. I'll take a bath. I suppose it isn't an extra?"

"We like the guests to be clean and neat about the place, sir. There is, therefore, no charge for a bath."

Hamish regarded his vanishing back with reverence. Laura regarded her son less affectionately, when sleek, clean, and shining, he presented himself before her.

"Well," she said, "what have *you* come for?"

"To ask why I can't go to school in January. I've read all about it. Frozen wash-basins, so that you can't wash, dreadful grub, so you think you're in a foreign prison, underground form-rooms hundreds of degrees below zero, sadistic prefects..."

"They can't be sadistic enough to suit *me*," said Laura.

"It sounds a most inviting prospect," said Dame Beatrice, producing, as though out of a hat, chocolates,

potato crisps, and liquorice all-sorts.

"You know," said Hamish, reaching out for the goodies, "you're the only person who really understands me, Mrs. Dame."

"But, back to the subject of those two girls," said Laura to her employer, "what do you think we ought to do?"

"The one thing we cannot do is to take Mr. Towne to court. The car was large, the lane is very narrow, there was a bend around which he could not possibly have seen the girls approaching, and the evidence against him rests on their word alone."

"Well, then, what *can* we do?"

"At present, nothing. Hamish would like his lunch early, then he can have a rest before you hire a pony for him."

"He's the complete human cormorant, certainly," Laura agreed, looking at her son with the fascination of horror. "All right. I'll push him into the dining-room while we have a civilised drink and then, as you say, he can sit still for a bit while we have our lunch. I'd better ring up the stables right away."

"You do just that, and hurry up about it," said Hamish. Laura clouted him, a gesture which he accepted with the greatest of *sang-froid*.

"May I have a tomato juice, please?" he asked. "One gave up lemonade when one was seven. With grandfather in Scotland I was allowed a dash of whisky. He said new dogs learn old tricks, whereas old dogs don't learn new tricks. Interesting, and not altogether true. Look at politicians."

"I don't want to," said Laura. "Go and get yourself that tomato juice and then for goodness' sake have your lunch."

"Will they serve me in the bar? I shouldn't wish to be embarrassed by a refusal because I'm under eighteen."

Laura went out and returned with the tomato juice. Hamish gulped it down and then headed for the dining-room. Laura sighed. Dame Beatrice cackled.

“You will trust him to ride alone, after the gipsy’s warning?” she asked. Laura looked surprised.

“Did you never read Mr. P. G. Wodehouse on the subject of the page-boy Harold and the chance of his being bitten by a snake?” she demanded.

“I don’t think I ever did.”

“Well, when Jeeves’s views were canvassed, he contended that, in such an emergency, his anxiety would be entirely for the snake. If Hamish runs into trouble, my anxiety will be entirely for the other person.”

Laura accompanied her son to the riding-stables at half-past two, saw him mounted, and then walked back to the hotel, but not before he had asked her to tell him the number of the car which had tried to run down the two girls. They knew it, and had given it to her over the telephone. Laura, who knew that she would be plagued by Hamish for days if she did not repeat it to him, confided it hastily, fairly sure that he would forget it once that his curiosity was satisfied.

Hamish owed his almost boundless self-confidence and his overt personality to two factors. One of these was his heredity. Neither Laura nor Detective Chief-Inspector Gavin lacked personality. The other factor was that everything the child had been taught had been taught him extremely well. He was, at the age of ten, a daring and accomplished diver and swimmer, his batting and fielding were, for his age, first class, and he rode like a prince. He was a tall boy, extremely well built and yet also graceful. He had given up dancing classes (at his own urgent request) and was learning judo, which Laura much preferred to boxing, and the piano, which he intended to give up in favour of the organ, which made, he said, a great deal more noise.

His estimate of his prowess at Greek and Latin was more modest than was justified by the facts. Like most intelligent children of his age, he learned easily and had no objection to being taught. Besides, he got on well with the

scholarly, kindly vicar and showed him always his best side. Laura and Hamish themselves were in conflict only because both enjoyed the fight for power. Laura respected her son, and in her he found an opponent worthy of his steel.

"She leaves me alone. I can manage my own affairs," he had said, at the age of seven, to his father. "I suppose not many mothers are like that."

"She leaves *me* alone. I am allowed to manage *my* own affairs," Gavin had replied. "Very few wives, and even fewer mothers, are capable of so much self-control."

"So it ought to be thank God kneeling for a good *woman's* love. I'm not so sure that she exactly loves us, you know."

"Well, it's probably a bit difficult," Gavin had said, with a grin. Father and son understood one another perfectly, a fact which Laura recognised with a mixture of irritation and gratitude.

Hamish, on this occasion dismissing all thoughts of his mother, rode the pony at an easy pace on to the Lawn. There were a number of the Forest ponies about, but they took not the slightest notice of him or of his mount, but continued their quiet grazing. Hamish reined in his pony and studied them before he moved on. He was following a narrow path, without being on it, which led, between a ditch and the open grassland, straight across the Lawn towards some woods.

He skirted the woods when he came to them, and branched off to the left towards a rough, almost unmade road. Without his knowledge, he was on the track which led to Campden-Towne's house. He kept his pony on the grass, but, hoping that the road would lead to something interesting, he followed its course. The pony plodded on until Hamish decided upon a gallop. This soon ate up a couple of hundred yards of the flat but rather uneven surface of the ground and brought them on to the common,



but at a point where the rough road crossed a bridge which Richardson would have recognised.

Hamish, always interested in streams, rode on to the bridge, dismounted, slung the reins over his arm and walked the pony to the parapet so that they could look at the running water. A toot on the horn of a car caused the boy to look round. A large limousine drew up and the driver leaned out.

"You're trespassing here," he said. "This is a private road."

Hamish raised his cap.

"I'm extremely sorry," he said. "Do you mind if I just go on? I haven't ridden on your road until now."

"Oh, carry on," said the man ungraciously, "but remember that, once you've crossed the bridge, you must take yourself off on to the heath. I don't have roads made up at my own expense for any casual strangers to make use of."

"Quite," agreed Hamish. "I do see your point. That's a very good car you have there, sir. A Kent number, I believe." He stared hard at the number plate, to the man's obvious annoyance.

"Oh, go and write down some train numbers, can't you?" he snarled. "Now get along with you."

Hamish mounted his pony, raised his riding crop in an ironic gesture unusual, perhaps, in so young a boy, and rode on. The car, imitating its owner's angry snarl, drove off. When it had rounded the bend, Hamish solemnly recited to himself its number and then remarked to the pony that it was the car which had attempted to run down two girls. As soon as he had crossed the bridge, he rode off on to the grass and continued upon its uneven surface until he came out on to the heath and found himself facing, albeit at some distance, an important house partly hidden among trees.

Hamish possessed the original and slightly dare-devil mentality of his mother, combined, although not so strongly,

with his father's sense of civic responsibility and duty. He rode up to the house, hitched the pony to a convenient bit of trellis, and thundered on the front door. The dim-witted maid, who had once refused to allow Richardson to use the telephone, opened a crack of perhaps eight inches and said, "Well? Master's out."

"Yes, I know," said Hamish. "He's in trouble. He ran down two girls—well, anyway, he tried to run them down."

"What of it?"

"Nothing. I just thought I'd mention it, that's all."

"Oh? Oh, well, perhaps you'll wait a minute. I'll see if the mistress can see you."

But an interview of this sort was beyond Hamish's scope. As soon as she had gone, he unhitched the pony, mounted it, and galloped away. His subsequent adventures had no particular history. He rode back to the hotel. Laura walked beside him to the stables, paid for his outing, and took him back to the hotel for tea.

That evening, just as she was going up to get ready for dinner, Dame Beatrice was called to the telephone. It was the Superintendent at the other end.

"Mr. Campden-Towne called us up," he said, "to report an accident. He says two girls were run down somewhere near here. He doesn't know where, but says that the number of his car was given in error and that he knows nothing about it."

"Shades of Hamish!" said Dame Beatrice, who had received a concise and truthful account of his outing from the boy.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am?"

"Come over this evening at about half-past eight, if you can. I may have some news for you."

"It would help a good deal if you have. I don't mind saying that we're getting browned-off with house-to-house questioning. We no longer suspect Mr. Richardson, but can't get on to much else. There's no doubt Campden-Towne and

his wife were represented by the Maidston couple at that London hotel, and I've questioned them again, but nothing seems to come of it. Campden-Towne says he made the booking but couldn't keep it, and so sent the Maidstons. Using a false name isn't a criminal offence in itself. There's got to be a crime connected with it."

"I should have thought there were two crimes connected with it," said Dame Beatrice.

# CHAPTER NINETEEN

## The Return of the Prodigals

*Upon my word, a very well-looking house;  
antique but creditable.*

Oliver Goldsmith

"Things begin to add up, ma'am," said the Superintendent. "Following your call, we got the addresses of the two young ladies you mentioned and I sent a uniformed officer to see them. They have asked for police protection."

"I hardly think they need it, Superintendent, now that the fact of attempted murder is out."

"What about this young Master Gavin, who seems to have set the cat among the pigeons?"

"He will be safe enough here. He will not be allowed out alone."

"Campden-Towne is hardly likely to have a line on him, I suppose, but I think it might be wise to keep an eye lifting. There's been something very fishy going on. If only we knew what it was!"

"I can tell you what I think it was," said Dame Beatrice. "It was espionage. I have puzzled over the facts so far as we know them, and the most significant, it seems to me, are that Mr. Campden-Towne is in shipping and that he pretended to be in London when, actually, he had passed over his booking to the Maidston couple. Have you

discovered where the Campden-Townes *did* spend the night of the murders?"

"No, ma'am, we have not. We've been to every hotel, guest-house, and pub in the Forest and beyond. I've come to the conclusion that they must have been staying at a private house, and, if they were, then a needle in a haystack isn't in the picture, is it?"

"Have you tried Mr. Campden-Towne's office in Southampton?"

"No, but it's an idea, especially if the two murdered men were in his pay. But where would his wife have been, if she wasn't at home that night?"

"With him. He must have needed some help in moving the bodies from the car, and she is a well-built, strong creature, is she not?"

"I'd better see her again. I shall never break *him* down, but *she* might be more vulnerable."

"I doubt it, Superintendent. She is quite intelligent, I'd say, and she must realise, surely, that her safety, apart from her livelihood, is completely bound up in that of her husband. Besides, I imagine she is in love with him. Of course, she is entirely under his thumb."

"But this espionage business. It seems far-fetched to me."

"It may be far-fetched, but let us take the facts. We know that ponies have disappeared. We know that Colnbrook and Bunt were often out on the Lawn here and on the big common at the end of this road, where there are always ponies grazing. Now I thought at first that the ponies were stolen by night and shipped off from Southampton for what they would fetch abroad, particularly in America, although it seemed a big risk to take for the sums of money involved. Then Laura brought back a book on the New Forest which the young women at the riding-stables had lent her, and when she had finished with it I took it up, out of

idle interest. However, I read it with an interest which was anything but idle.”

“But—espionage, ma’am. Aren’t we perhaps wandering from the point a bit?”

“By no means, Superintendent. My attention was attracted to some diagrams in the essay entitled *The New Forest Commoners*.<sup>\*</sup> From it I learned that the four Agisters employed by the Verderers mark the tails of the animals in a manner approved by the Court of Verderers, so that if a stallion (in particular—the mares do not travel or stray so much) wanders from his own part of the Forest, he can be returned when the creatures are rounded up for sale.”

“Yes, I know all that, ma’am. Each district has its own special pattern. Right round the tail for Number One District, one cut out of offside for Number Two, and so on.”

“Exactly. Two cuts out of offside for Number Three and one cut out of nearside for Number Four. Not at all unsightly, not cruel, since only the hair is cut, but distinctive and simple. Well, it seemed to me that, with certain alterations and additions, which, I am afraid, would also involve an extra branding of the animals, a code could be worked out.”

“It sounds fantastic to me, ma’am.”

“Oh, would you say that? I don’t see why it should not work with remarkable efficiency. There would be no documents, as such, and no telephone calls. The ponies themselves would be the documents. Much less clumsy than the wartime, ‘John is well again’ and all that kind of thing.”

“But with the same purpose in mind, you think?—a way of sending information to, and about, secret agents? If so, it will have to go beyond me, ma’am. I’d better get the Chief Constable on to it.”

“Let us catch our murderers first. From that the rest will stem.”

“I’d rather have it that way, ma’am. Your idea is most ingenious, I admit, but—well, I don’t know. It still seems far-

fetches to me. Anyway, I'll get on to Campden-Towne's Southampton office and see what comes of that."

"Well, I can do no more here, Superintendent, so I shall return home. My address is *The Stone House, Wandles Parva*. That will always find me, even if I go to London."

"Many thanks, ma'am," said the Superintendent, writing it down. "And thanks for your help. It's started a hare, anyway."

"You might do worse than bully the Maidstons a bit."

"Now, ma'am, you mustn't suggest that a police officer ever bullies anybody."

Dame Beatrice cackled.

"By the way, what about Mr. Richardson? I should like to invite him and my nephew to stay with me at the Stone House for a while," she said.

"I see no objection to that, ma'am. Would you let me know if he leaves your home? We should just like to have knowledge of his whereabouts."

"I thought you no longer suspected him."

"Well, that's true enough, but we may need him as a material witness later on."

"I see," said Dame Beatrice, perceiving clearly that, so far as the Superintendent was concerned, Richardson was by no means out of the wood. "Very well, then. You shall be fully informed of his movements." She saw the Superintendent off and then went back to Laura, who was helping Hamish with a crossword puzzle.

"I still think the word we want is egret, *not* heron," said Hamish, "because then it fits with equal, radical and tiara. Oh, yes, you did say tiara. Did you know they've lost one of the royal jewels at the Tower of London? It's not very valuable in itself, but does it have sentimental value? I mean, suppose I found it, could I get a decent reward, do you think?"

"I think you'd probably end up in Borstal. Oh, hallo, Mrs. Croc., dear! You arrive at a timely hour. My offspring is

driving me up the wall.”

“I wonder why they call us offspring,” said Hamish. “I understand that the birth of a human being is rather a slow process.”

“Oh, go and buy yourself something at the village shop,” said Laura. “And please take a jolly long time about it.”

“My mother,” said Hamish formally to Dame Beatrice, “is rather peeved because she can’t remember what is interesting about Cantor Taratosh. It only needs eight letters and it’s a four one three. I say it’s Shot a Rat, although I don’t see why he should.”

“You are correct,” Dame Beatrice assured him. “*The Fall of Mendel Krick* by Isaac Babel, was produced by the B.B.C.’s Drama Department, and the incident to which you refer took place during a service in a synagogue in the ghetto of Odessa during the Tsarish régime. One more thing, when you have pencilled in your crossword puzzle—oh, by the way, twenty-two down should be Calvin, not calves—we are returning home.”

“Ma said it should be Calvin,” said Hamish generously. “Sorry, Ma. That makes *isobars* come right, so that’s the end of it. Why do we have to go home? I like it here.”

“Mr. Richardson and Uncle Denis are coming back with us.”

“Oh, well, that’s different. Will they stop playing golf and help me with my homework?”

Dame Beatrice could not promise either of these things. Hamish took his pocket-money and himself off to the village shop and Dame Beatrice took Laura into her confidence.

“Oh, Lord!” said Laura, at the end of the recital. “Think we ought to have let Hamish go into the village alone? That skunk did try to run down those two girls, you know.”

“I do not believe he would risk running down Hamish in the village street in broad daylight, child.”



"There's a nasty bend before you get to the water-splash."

"Mr. Campden-Towne will have no check on the boy's movements, my dear Laura, but, if it will save you from feeling anxiety, let us order the car and go after the boy."

"Good heavens, no! Hamish would loathe it. I couldn't do that. We shall have to chance it. Anyway, you say he'll be all right and I'll take your word for it."

"Well, I hardly see how Mr. Campden-Towne could find out (except by clairvoyance) that Hamish would go to the village just at this particular time."

"I'm sorry. I'm just a fussy old hen."

"Oh, no, you are not. We shall need to be careful in the future. Mr. Campden-Towne will discover where we have gone and it is at the Stone House that we shall need to keep watch. We do not want Hamish to be kidnapped and held as a hostage for our good behaviour. I am glad we shall have the two young men and George with us. They must help us to garrison the place."

"It sounds like fun. All the same..."

"We had better have the car," said Dame Beatrice.

Hamish was surprised to see them. They met him on the village side of the water-splash.

"Hallo," he said. "I didn't know you were going for a drive. Anywhere decent?"

"Hop in, if you've bought what you want," said Laura crossly. "Sit beside George."

"Have a toffee, George?" said Hamish, between whom and the chauffeur there had always existed a warm friendship. "Where are we going?"

"Along the Bournemouth road for a bit, sir."

"Bournemouth? Not a bad idea."

"Along the Bournemouth *road*," said Laura frostily. Hamish turned his head, politely pouched his piece of toffee in his left cheek, and asked (as well he might, having given her no cause to take offence),

“What’s the matter, Ma? Have I done anything I shouldn’t?—or said anything, I mean?”

“Good gracious, no,” said Laura, recovering her equanimity, “of course you haven’t. And we *will* go to Bournemouth, if that’s what you’d like.”

They went to Bournemouth and Hamish and his mother swam in the warm September sea. Dame Beatrice sat in the lounge of the hotel and made notes. George gossiped with the man in charge of the hotel garage. A fine and pleasant time was enjoyed by all. They had dinner in Bournemouth and did not return to the New Forest Park Hotel until ten o’clock. Hamish was sent to bed and a telephone message was waiting for Dame Beatrice from the Superintendent.

“I have passed on your ideas and they have been received with interest, but with a good deal of caution. I will get in touch with you later on, if I may.”

Dame Beatrice telephoned back and told the Superintendent that she would be delighted to be in touch with him again.

“So, next time I reach you, ma’am, you’ll be at your own home?” he asked.

“At the Stone House,” said Dame Beatrice. They returned to it on the following day.

“I say,” said Hamish, “do I have to go to the vicar tomorrow morning? It’s Divinity and his views are a bit dim, you know.”

“You’re not thinking of becoming a minister of religion?” asked Dame Beatrice.

“Oh, no. I am an informed agnostic. It’s the same with ghosts,” said Hamish.

“Indeed?”

“Oh, yes. You remember the person who said, ‘I don’t believe in ghosts, but I’m afraid of them,’ don’t you?”

“Really, my dear Hamish?”

“Well, it’s the same with me and religion.”

"Believe me, a very well-balanced point of view. It will all sort itself out in time."

"What do I do now, though?"

"Be strong and very courageous."

"Be your age," said Hamish, rudely and unkindly.

Dame Beatrice cackled and, with a thin but iron arm, forestalled Laura's intention of clouting her son. "Sorry," said Hamish, without conviction. "That was nasty of me, wasn't it?"

"It was," agreed Dame Beatrice. "One should respect the aged. I refer, of course, to myself."

"I do respect you. Where do we go from here?"

"Into a state of siege."

"Siege? You mean the house might be surrounded? Oh, good! What about sharing out the guns?"

"*Noiseless* warfare!" said Dame Beatrice, impressively. "*Knives*, as the gentleman said, are a different matter."

"George once told me that, given a decent-sized spanner, he could take on three gunmen and lay them out."

"George issued an understatement. He often does. He is a Londoner. He could lay four of them out."

They had left the hotel at just after three and had driven along the Forest roads for an hour before they ended up at Lymington to make for the Stone House. Richardson had telephoned his mother, for Dame Beatrice, in semi-serious mood, had informed him that he might have to fight for his life if he came to her home.

Five o'clock found them all at tea in Dame Beatrice's comfortable drawing-room and at six o'clock Celestine, Dame Beatrice's housekeeper, parlour-maid, housemaid, friend, and jealous guardian, addressed her spouse Henri, who was enjoying a bottle of wine and a snack of bread and cheese in the kitchen.

"Madame enrages herself. She has enemies."

"She does not enrage herself," protested Henri, "but I think there are some things in the air."

"What makes the young Monsieur Richardson?"

"He is, perhaps, a murderer."

Celestine shrieked.

"A murderer? An assassin? But no!"

"One does not know." Henri took up his largest carving-knife and sharpened it with great solemnity. At this moment Hamish walked into the kitchen.

"I say," he said, "the cakes and things at tea were all right, but isn't there something to *eat*?" His eye fell on the manoeuvres of Henri. "Gosh!" he added. "Are we really in a state of siege? Aunt Dame said so, but I thought she was having me on."

Celestine hastened to provide him with cold pie and cocoa, viands at the sight of which she herself flinched, but which, she had long realised, were one of the stays of English youth.

"You," said Henri, with ferocious humour, producing a large but superseded carving-knife, "must be well-armed, monsieur, should a siege take place. Accept this, if you please."

"*Knives!*" quoted Hamish, flourishing the one provided. "This is the life! Oh, thanks a lot, Henri!" He retired, making large passes in the air.

"You are a monster who lives by the death of little children!" shrieked Celestine. "Sharpen an axe!"

Henri, who had lived with his wife for more than thirty years, realised that she was in what the English would call "one of her moods," and that, as she was thus possessed, the simplest way to avoid difficulties was to placate her by implicitly obeying her orders. Accordingly, he brought in his largest axe from the weatherproof woodshed and solemnly put on it a lethal cutting-edge. He displayed his handiwork. His wife nodded.

"It is well," she said. "There are sweetbreads for dinner. I hope the young men will like them. Dame Beatrice does not eat glands. For her..."

"A curried egg and much Melba toast."

"Call for Georges."

Henri retired to the back door and let out an ear-splitting whistle. There was a rattling of footsteps as George descended from his eyrie above the garage, his own choice of residence, since he could have had a good bedroom in the house if such had been his desire. He came into the kitchen and spotted Henri's weapon. He eyed it and took it up.

"Changing your job, brother?" he asked. "Plenty of work in the woods near where we've been staying."

"And a dangerous place to stay!" said Celestine sharply. "What made Madame in such a locality?"

"Oh, we had our usual murders. I *think* Madam is wise to the identity of the criminal. In other words, she reckons her job there is just about cleaned up. That's why we've come back home."

"This house will be a battlefield. You will see. We shall sell our lives dearly. All the same, this imbecile had no right to give a young boy a carving knife. He will suicide himself."

"Not Master Hamish," said George. "But what *is* all this, anyway?"

"I think it is nonsense, but it is as well to be prepared. One hears of terrible things, and we have a young boy in the house. He may be attacked, murdered, kidnapped! Who can tell?"

"From what I gathered, he *did* stick his neck out. Accused some gentleman of attempting to run down two girls."

"Truly?"

"Well, I didn't get the information direct, as you might say, but from bits of back-seat conversation while I was bringing the ladies and the young gentleman home, something of the sort must have occurred."

"But this is terrible! We shall be surrounded by assassins!"

"I shouldn't worry, Cissie," said George. "Detective Chief-Inspector Gavin is joining the party this evening. Besides, if you keep on moaning, you'll make Henry spoil the dinner. What did you whistle me down for?" he added, turning to the husband.

"I ordered him to whistle for you, Georges," said Celestine. "I wish you to arm yourself. You and he must patrol the house this night. You must be on guard. You must on no account sleep. Neither of you should sleep."

"Oh, I sleep on a hair-trigger since the war," said George easily. "And if you make Henry lose his eight hours he'll lose all his good looks as well."

"Over *you* I have no authority, Georges, but Henri will do as he is told," said Celestine severely.

"Very well, chérie," agreed Henri, favouring George with an enormous wink. There were a number of spare rooms in the Stone House, and Celestine always kept the beds in them well aired.

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\* By Sir Barkeley Piggott.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

## Escapade

*They searched the country wide and braid,  
The forests far and near,  
And they found him into Elmond's wood,  
Tearing his yellow hair.*

Old Ballad—(Anon)

Gavin, the young men, and Laura enjoyed the sweetbreads. Dame Beatrice, whose interest in food was apt to lessen with every passing year, dutifully ate curried eggs and Melba toast. Hamish, sumptuously fed in the kitchen, went to bed without being ordered to do so, at eight o'clock, just as it was beginning to get dark, for, on this particular evening, Hamish had secret plans. From the age of seven he had dispensed with Laura's attempts to visit him to say good night and she had also promised not to peep in on him when she herself was ready to go to bed. He had no fear, therefore, that his plans would be frustrated because of maternal anxiety and care. Once he was upstairs he would see no more of his parents until the morning.

Hamish possessed the glory and the weakness (in the opinion of most of his adult relatives) of having a single-track mind. Once his heart was set on any project, however ill-advised and even dangerous it might seem to others, he felt bound to carry it through. He had once addressed his father in these terms:

"I don't mind letting *you* down, but I'm never going to let *myself* down. By this I mean that if I commit myself to something I shall feel bound to go on with it."

"Well, all right. I hope you'll stick to that," his father had replied, for Robert Gavin viewed with equanimity those vagaries and resources in his son which occasionally made Laura wonder how soon she would be subjected to a nervous breakdown.

Having supper in the kitchen with Henri and Celestine was always interesting, and the boy was already fluent in idiomatic French. Fortunately, Dame Beatrice's servants were Parisians and their accent was untainted by *patois*. Hamish had listened, fascinated and excited—although he did not betray his emotions—to Celestine's outspoken fears for the safety of the house and its occupants, a monologue punctuated only very occasionally by Henri's soothing comments.

Hamish placed no reliance on these, for had not Henri presented him with the carving knife—unsharpened, it was true—with which to defend himself (and possibly his mother and Dame Beatrice) when the fun began? He went into the dining-room to greet and bid good night to his father as soon as supper was over in the kitchen, and found the five adults, empty coffee cups before them—for Celestine had orders not to clear these until she and Henri had concluded their own meal and the company had repaired to the drawing-room—arguing the case against Campden-Towne. They ceased talking as soon as he arrived to say good night. Laura gave him an apple, as it was always a major battle to get him to clean his teeth, and expressed surprise and pleasure when he informed her that he was going straight to bed.

"I've been listening to a lot more French than usual," he explained, "and it's made my brain rather tired."

"He's up to something," said Laura, as soon as he had gone. "I'm going up to his room to make sure he goes to



bed.”

“I thought you had a gentlemen’s agreement with him not to do that,” said Gavin. Laura snorted, but when the others went into the drawing-room she accompanied them, although she cast a speculative look at the staircase on the way.

Hamish, having gained his room, switched on the light and picked up the carving knife. With some difficulty, and having to employ a slightly saw-like movement, he managed to cut the ball of his thumb and draw a spot or two of blood. Satisfied, he put down the knife on his bedside table, undressed, sat on the bed to eat his apple and then lay down, leaving the light on. For a year or more he had trained himself to wake at a given time, mostly in order to go swimming or riding at dawn, a practice which had always received encouragement from his mother.

On this occasion he proposed to allow himself to sleep until eleven, by which time he supposed, in his ignorance of their habits, his parents and Dame Beatrice would be in bed. Having banged his head eleven times on the pillow and muttered fiercely to his subconscious mind, “And I mean *tonight*, not tomorrow morning,” he fell asleep. True to his own self-discipline, he woke at eleven, dressed, turned out the light and, shoes in hand, crept down the staircase.

From outside the drawing-room door he could hear his father’s voice. So they were still up! What was more, they might emerge at any moment and discover him. He debated, but only for a few seconds, whether to go on, and chance having them hear the front door being opened and shut, or whether to retreat to his room and wait there until they had gone to bed. Unfortunately he had no idea when this was likely to be. They might stay up and talk for hours. The first of his preconceived ideas was obviously wrong. He had better carry on, all the same.

His mind made up, he turned the knob of the front door. He would chance matters. This was not easy. The devoted

servants had locked and bolted the door and put the chain on. Bolts have to be noisily withdrawn, and chains are apt to rattle. There was one bright spot, however. If the house had been made secure, it was probable that the servants had gone to bed. This would mean that the side door and the kitchen door, both well away from the drawing-room, would be available to a person who wanted to leave the house unobserved and unheard.

Hamish turned from the front door and tiptoed down the hall. His assumption that the servants, at least, had been helpful and sensible enough to go to bed proved to be correct. He listened intently at the kitchen door, but there was no sound of any kind except for the loud ticking of the kitchen clock. He wasted no more time, but padded in his stockinged feet to the back door. It was not until he had pulled the door to and had put on his shoes, that he remembered the carving knife. He was bitterly regretful to have left it behind, but felt it would be madness to go back for it and risk being caught.

Then he remembered that there were bound to be knives in the kitchen. He had not latched the door; he had merely pulled it to; he did not stop to take off his shoes again, trusting, this time, that the kitchen, shut off, as it was, by a green-baize door, would prove sufficiently remote from the drawing-room for his footsteps to go unheard.

The kitchen, of course (he thought angrily), was in complete and utter darkness. He would have to switch on a light. He groped for it, and found it. Then he opened the table drawer. It did not contain a knife of any description, for Henri was much too jealous of his implements to leave them lying around in table drawers. Each was put lovingly away in its own velvet-covered, satin-lined, padded and quilted case. The only useful object (from the boy's point of view) which the drawer contained was a butcher's steel. Hamish, intent on his adventure, seized this and crept away again.

Half an hour later Celestine, who had changed her mind about Henri's guard-duty, preferring to have him guard her person rather than the house, with difficulty woke him. He was a very sound sleeper and preferred to have his eight hours undisturbed. He had to pay attention at last, however, for Celestine abandoned her attempts to shake him into wakefulness and, instead, bit him sharply on the lobe of the ear. Henri yelled and sat up.

"Be silent, idiot!" hissed his spouse. "Those assassins are here!"

"Nonsense, my cabbage! You have been dreaming," riposted Henri, tenderly caressing his ear.

"Keep your voice low! Tell me, did you or did you not turn off the light in the kitchen before you came to bed?"

"But certainly I turned it off."

"Well, it is on again now. It is shining on the wall of the kitchen garden. Turn your head and look for yourself. Better still, go and look out of the window and assure yourself that what I say is true."

Henri groaned, but, well aware that he would get no peace—and certainly no more sleep—until he had obeyed her, he climbed out of bed and went to the window. (The blinds in their bedroom were never drawn except when Celestine decided that the summer sunshine was too strong for the very pretty carpet which Dame Beatrice had given them.)

"It is very true," said Henri. The light *is* on. But there is a simple explanation which you might have thought of for yourself instead of making a meal of my ear."

"The explanation is obvious! Those assassins, I tell you, they are here!"

"The explanation is obvious, certainly. It is Madame Gavin. She is often hungry and she sleeps little. She knows that there is always something in my larder which she will like. No doubt she is refreshing herself at this moment.

There is a cold raised pie and some bottles of beer. Now compose yourself and let me sleep.”

“You do not come back to this bed! Put on your trousers—those barbarous garments!—and take with you your axe and confront these criminals.”

Henri groaned again, but did as he was told. At least, he carried out instructions so far as pulling on his trousers and picking up his axe were concerned. What he did *not* do was to repair forthwith to the kitchen. He preferred to take the more prudent course of seeking reinforcements just in case his wife was right—although he did not think she was. He went to the door of the Gavins’ room on the floor below, and knocked.

They had been upstairs for less than ten minutes and Laura was creaming her face.

“See who that is,” she said. Gavin went to the door and through the opening Henri could see Laura seated at the dressing-table. He gestured violently to Gavin and exclaimed,

“So my wife is right! I did well to come and see!”

“What on earth are you doing with that bloody great axe?” asked Gavin, eyeing the keen-edged weapon with amusement. “Gone berserk or something?”

“Someone has turned on the light in the kitchen. I thought it was Madame Gavin, but I see not so.”

“Well, I *was* thinking of going down,” said Laura, applying a tissue to her well-creamed countenance, “but I haven’t so far. I expect you left the light on when you went to bed. It’s easy enough. My brothers are always doing it.”

“I did not leave the light on, madame.”

“Oh, well, I’ll pop down and have a look round,” said Gavin, pulling the belt of his dressing-gown a little closer. “*Could* be burglars, I suppose. They’re probably mopping up the bottled beer.”

“Arm yourself, monsieur! They may be desperate!”

“Then you’d better come along with that axe.”

"Willingly, monsieur." With Gavin in the lead, they tiptoed down the stairs. The kitchen was empty.

"Then you *must* have left the light on," said Gavin, reasonably enough. But Henri was obstinately certain that this was not so.

"Let us rouse the household, monsieur," he urged. "Of a certainty, someone has entered."

"Oh, rot!" said Gavin easily. "No need at all to panic. But we can have a look at the downstairs doors and windows, if that will help."

It took them less than two minutes to find out that the back door was not only unlocked and unbolted, but that it was not even latched.

"And now, monsieur," said Henri, with dignity, "you are not prepared to say, I hope, that, in addition to leaving the light on—an extravagance and a carelessness of which I have never been guilty during all my years in the service of madame—I neglected to lock and bolt this door? Monsieur, my honour is at stake. I must convince you. Allow me to arouse Georges. He knows that always—but *always!*—I lock and bolt this door as soon as he goes at night to his apartment above the garage."

"I think a better idea would be to have a look round first. All the same, if you *did* lock and bolt the door, I don't see how anybody from outside could get in. Locks, I grant you, can be picked, but a couple of hefty bolts, top and bottom, are a different matter. You can see for yourself that the door is quite undamaged and the hinges are still functioning. Still, we'll take a look round, first securing the door and then giving the once-over to the windows and the side entrance. If you're right, it seems to me more than likely that somebody must have got in through a window and then left by the back door. Wonder what they were after?"

"If burglars, the silver, and madame's antique clocks, most likely, monsieur."

"She's got some pretty good china, too. All right. Let's go and check up. I suppose you'd know if anything was missing."

"Of the silver and the clocks, undoubtedly, monsieur. Of the china, I am less sure."

"Oh, well, I can remember that, I think."

They made a methodical search, but nothing appeared to be missing and the house was its usual serene, untroubled self. As they came out of the dining-room they met Laura at the foot of the stairs.

"What *is* all the hoo-ha?" she enquired.

"Don't know yet," her husband replied. "Back door open, kitchen light on, nothing missing, nobody about."

"Except Hamish," said Laura immediately. "I *knew* he was up to something. I said so. I'm going up to his room, whether you like it or not."

"Hold on a minute," urged Gavin. "I'm not going to snoop around outside. It's hardly likely to be Hamish. He always scrambles down that porch over the front door. It's bang outside his bedroom window."

"He wouldn't climb down in the dark."

"Probably got eyes like a cat. Anyway, he must know the way blindfold. Besides, it wasn't really dark when he went to bed. You go on up and turn in."

"Nonsense! I'm going to Hamish's room."

Gavin followed her up the stairs and Henri, with his axe and with an uneasy recollection of the blunt-edged carving-knife he had supplied to the boy, brought up the rear. At her son's bedroom door, Laura paused to listen. There was nothing to be heard, so she turned the handle and switched on the light. Hamish's pyjamas were on the floor and there were neither other clothes nor his shoes to be seen. She swung round on her husband, but Gavin gripped her and put a hand over her mouth.

"The light, Henri!" he said. Henri switched it off and Gavin released his wife. All three listened intently.

Somebody was approaching by car. Then there was silence. "May be all right," said Gavin. "Probably is. But I don't like the youngster being out on his own at this time of night. I suppose he's in the garden somewhere. He'd hardly wander away. I'll go and call him in, curse his little nylon socks."

"That car's in the drive," murmured Laura. "It can't be callers! It *could* be the Superintendent, but I should have thought he'd phone." Suddenly she gripped her husband's arm. There was a slight scrabbling sound on the porch below the window, and Hamish tumbled into the room. Gavin called for a light. As it was switched on, the bedroom door opened and Dame Beatrice appeared. She had her small revolver at the ready.

"Oh, golly!" exclaimed Hamish. "How good! But no time for that now. The house is surrounded. Two of them. Came by car. Did you hear it?"

"Get into bed at once!" said his father. Hamish glanced at him and obeyed, dropping his things on the floor and hastily pulling on his pyjamas. "Now get to sleep and we'll settle things in the morning." He put out the light.

"They're coming here, you know," said Hamish, softly. "I wasn't making it up. I wasn't, really!"

That he was right was soon proved. There was another scrabbling sound on the roof of the porch and the window was pushed further open. A voice said, "Ladder! I'm not a blasted monkey on a stick!"

Gavin put out his hand to touch and reassure his son, but Hamish needed no such comfort. He was having the thrill of a lifetime. Gavin moved like a cat to the door. From the window came a grunt and the sound of a light ladder being rested against the sill. Then the window was filled with a monstrous, bulky shadow. The torchlight was blotted out as the man turned to aid his companion. Gavin waited, his hand on the switch, until they were both in the room. Then he gave an Indian war-whoop and turned on the light. Then he sprang. Henri, who had remained on the landing,

came in again, waving his axe and chanting a Gallic battle-cry. He was followed by Laura, a tigress coming to the rescue of her young. Dame Beatrice followed, nursing her gun.

There was nothing to it. The intruders were taken by surprise and what with that and having to face Gavin with his police training, Henri with his fearsome weapon and Dame Beatrice with her small revolver, they offered no resistance. Laura, to her chagrin, was left with nothing to do. The men were taken downstairs to the dining-room and while Laura telephoned the Superintendent, Gavin questioned the intruders after informing them that he was a Detective Chief-Inspector from Scotland Yard.

They told him at once that they had been sent to kidnap the child by a man who had assured them that he was the boy's father. Gavin demanded the man's name. At first they protested that they did not know it; that they knew him only as "the governor."

At this Gavin turned to Dame Beatrice and asked, "Do you think you could refresh their memories?"

At the mention of Campden-Towne, Maidston, ponies, and ships, which she made implacably and with a mesmeric intensity which obviously unnerved them, they gave up the struggle.

"He had us sewn up," said one. "We didn't want to do it, sir, and that's a fact."

"Are you sailors?" asked Gavin.

"Ah, we are that," said the other. "He's got the goods on us, else he'd never have talked us into this."

"Well, we've got the goods on *him*," Gavin told them pleasantly. "He's a murderer with two deaths to his credit, and it's a good thing for you both that you didn't succeed in kidnapping my son, for—mark this!—at whatever risk to the boy, we should have been bound to pull Towne in. He's been selling State secrets. How does that strike you?"



The two men swore incredulously, and protested that they certainly had known nothing about it. Gavin believed them and said so.

"We knew there was funny business over the ponies," said one. "Leastways, we guessed as much. But we only thought he knocked 'em off."

"The ponies were a secret code, and a very simple and clever one. I'm not giving it away, of course, but I can assure you chaps that you're well out of this business."

"Well out, sir?"

"Yes, well out, unless Dame Beatrice wants to prosecute you for breaking into her house."

Dame Beatrice leered at the men and they flinched.

"I imagine that they will be more useful in court as witnesses than as defendants," she said.

"Yes, you'll have to give evidence as to the shipping of the ponies," agreed Gavin.

"Knowing them to have been knocked off, Guv?"

"I hardly think that need come into it. The less complicated your evidence the better, I should say, but of course, I'm not a lawyer."

The Superintendent turned up at this juncture and was admitted by Henri, who, after a hasty dash upstairs to reassure his wife, had returned to his self-imposed guard duty.

"And I think, Superintendent, that, for the sake of their own safety, it would be as well to take these men into protective custody until Campden-Towne and Maidston have been arrested," observed Dame Beatrice.

"We've got them, ma'am. Picked them up this afternoon as soon as your little party left the hotel. You convinced us all right, and I must apologise to Mr. Richardson for keeping the tabs on him like I have done," concluded the Superintendent handsomely. The young men, it transpired later, had not heard a sound of what had been going on, but had slept through everything.

# Fugue

*How all ye powers that rule above  
Grant we may evil shun  
And that henceforth such dreadful acts  
May never more be done.*

*Victorian Street Ballad*

"Just fancy," said Aileen Crumb to Doreen Dodd, "what some of we girls might have been letting ourselves in for!

"Glad we're sprinters and not milers."

"There's the cross-country runs old Artie is always bellyaching us into doing."

"I don't really dig that lark. Tiring, that's what I call it, and might any minute rick your ankle. Now this indoor work is a bit of all right. Under cover, and matting where it's needed, and no occasion to wear yourself out."

"See them Americans in the Indoors has to run into a bar at the finish of the sprints, save them concussing themselves against a wall or something?"

"Oh, well, they runs faster over there. Anyway, it's men, not us. Besides, if enough of them Yanks concusses themselves, we might stand a chance of a few more golds in the next Olympics. That's the way I look at it."

They giggled and then did a little "running on the spot" in order to warm up before they began any serious training.

"Let's barge that Corinna and that Dulcie off the track for a bit. Them hurdlers always thinks they should ought to have priority," said Doreen. "Wonderful how Corinna got

over Albert Colnbrook," she added unkindly. "She's going steady with Bob Chichester now, so I heard."

"Bob's treated himself to one of them fibre-glass poles. It bends like a bit of rubber piping. He'll break his neck one of these days," said Aileen, pleased by this thought.

"I'm glad, in a way, Mr. Towne only got life," said Doreen, changing the subject. "I couldn't really fancy seeing him hung."

"Huh! / could! He'll really do about nine years and then come out and do in somebodies else. You see if he don't!

"Get on with some work, you girls," said the trainer. "What you think you're here for?"

"To keep you in a job," said Doreen pertly. However, she walked over to the hurdlers and requested the favour of a few minutes' use of the track. The hurdlers, with a prospect of nearly eight months of non-competitive sport before them, were only too glad to step aside and take a rest.

"Hey, you girls, what about your exercises?" demanded the coach. "Some of you perishing little lie-about makes me wonder why I give up my time!"

"So do *we* wonder, thinking what perishing help you are!" retorted Dulcie, who was tired of playing second string to Corinna and firmly believed that, with better coaching, she could beat her. The trainer, whose defensive motto was *Never argue with women*, walked away and contented himself with a sardonic look at Penny the Putt, who was contorting herself into a series of fancy attitudes but without handling the shot. She had no intention of using it that winter, because she thought she was overdeveloping her biceps and might not look sufficiently attractive at the dances she proposed to attend.

"Well, Face?" she demanded tartly, suspending her operations. "What's given *you* the stomach-ache?"

"Well, Margot Fonteyn?" retorted the coach. "What you think *you're* practising? Swan Lake?"

"I'm loosening up, like you told us."

"Blimey! Your boyfriend's going to be lucky!" Delighted with this pithy comment, he walked away before Penny could hurl a shoe at him or find any other reply, and joined the milers Judy and Syl, who were in a corner of the arena putting in a stint of slow skipping. He advised them to "let the *knees* go, girls," before he passed on to the high jump and altered the position of a mat. Out of his range and orbit, Judy and Syl abandoned exercise and subsided on to a bench.

"What say we pack it in for tonight?" suggested Syl. "We got that cross-country run Saturday. Besides, giving evidence at that trial wasn't half an ordeal. I'll never feel the same again, especially after reading about it when it was over."

"Good thing it's all come out. Fancy Mr. Towne being a secret agent as well as a double murderer, and getting the poison through that boy of that other guilty lot! I couldn't hardly believe it, although it was all in the papers."

"Secret agent? That's only what they're called when they're on *our* side. I should call him a dirty spy. And what a lousy trick finding out all about that young What's 'is name what used to be a master at the school and then trying to frame him into the murders!"

"Oh, they're a crafty lot! In my opinion, Bert Colnbrook and that there Bunt never ought to have had nothing to do with them."

"I expect the money was good. And then, of course, they had to go and get above themselves and start a bit of blackmail. *That's* what got them done in. They ought to have known it was daft, as well as dangerous, to put pressure on a man like that."

"Mr. Towne wasn't all that daft. Fancy poisoning 'em at that Mr. Maidston's house, Mr. Towne knowing it was empty because of knowing the Maidstons—and I bet *she* knew all what was going on, for all they dismissed her from the case..."

“You mean, knowing they’d gone up to London in Mr. and Mrs. Towne’s name, so the house would be empty with the servants being give the evening off. But the cook said they never smelt a rat. A bit dumb, if you ask *me*. I bet I’d have had my suspicions if my boss had started throwing *me* favours out of the blue. Oh, well, come on, let’s beat it. You can come to supper if you like. I’ll send my kid brother out for pease pudden and faggots. My mum likes that. And we could take in some cider and p’raps a packet of fags.”

“Well, all right. I’ll treat us to the cider and the fags if you’re doing the rest. But don’t let Dad Artie know. He doesn’t half create if he finds us breaking training.”

“He’s got a single-track mind. Sometimes I wonder if we girls are wise to put ourselves in the power of a man like that. I mean, look at Svengali.”

“Look at who?”

“Oh, lose it! Do you know what my own dad calls Towne and Company?—a nest of adders. And so they are.”

“Adders?” Judy ventured upon the witticism of a lifetime. “The way they knocked off them ponies, I reckon it was subtraction they done, not addition. What do *you* say?”

## About the Author



Gladys Mitchell was born in the village of Cowley, Oxford, in April 1901. She was educated at the Rothschild School in Brentford, the Green School in Isleworth, and at Goldsmiths and University Colleges in London. For many years Miss Mitchell taught history and English, swimming, and games. She retired from this work in 1950 but became so bored without the constant stimulus and irritation of teaching that she accepted a post at the Matthew Arnold School in Staines, where she taught English and History, wrote the annual school play, and coached hurdling. She was a member of the Detection Club, the PEN, the Middlesex Education Society, and the British Olympic Association. Her

father's family are Scots, and a Scottish influence has appeared in some of her books.